

RESET!

THE
IMPRISONED PRINCESS
DREAMS OF
ANOTHER CHANCE!

2

KEI MISAWA

ILLUSTRATED BY POPORUCHA



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Reset! The Imprisoned Princess Dreams of Another Chance! Volume 2

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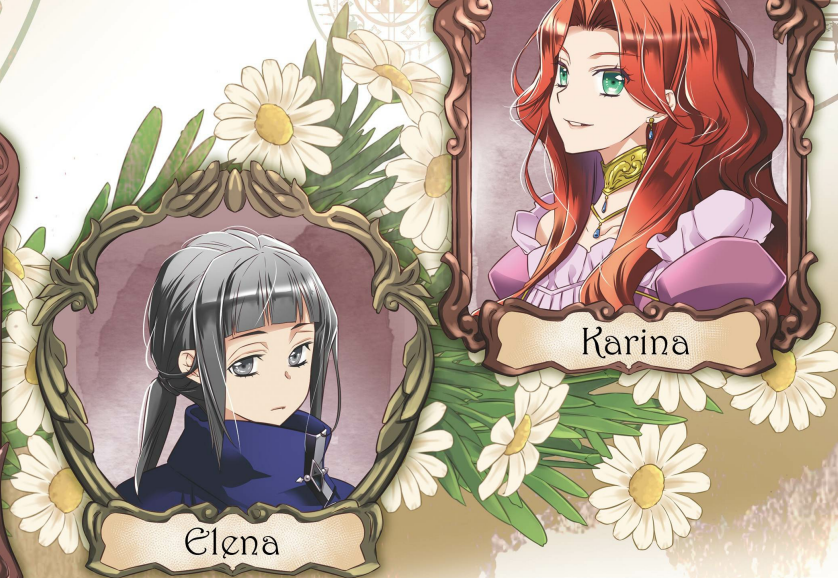
Annabel



Daniel



Edoile



Elena



Karina

Part Two: The Witch of the South

1. An Unexpected Invitation

IT happened one day not too long after I'd become an eighth-year student. My brother, Charles, came to me with an interesting new development to discuss.

"The Sunruta Kingdom? I got one, too?"

Apparently, the neighboring Sunruta Kingdom's prince, Prince Daniel, had sent me an invitation to his crowning ceremony.

In Najir, my kingdom, a crown prince is born already titled. But in the Sunruta Kingdom, he must first go through a crowning ceremony once he's come of age before he can be officially recognized as the prince. I recalled that my brother Charles had received this same invitation in my past life. But of course, I hadn't.

Despite that, it'd apparently been emphasized that my presence was desired this time around. I'd guessed that the crowning ceremony would be held this year, but I never expected to be invited!

"I think my invitation came by mistake," I insisted.

"Nonsense. It has your name on it. See?"

Charles sighed and rolled his eyes, waving my invitation at me. It was penned on very fancy paper and had "Annabel Gottenheim" written in cursive on it. There was no doubt at all that it was addressed to me.

"We'll send back our RSVPs together. Once you've finished writing yours, hand it over."

Charles was acting like me attending the ceremony was a foregone conclusion. Well, I suppose it was. After all, I couldn't just stay home when an invitation addressed to me arrived from royalty belonging to our neighboring country, now could I?

“Who else is slated to attend?”

“The Diplomatic Minister, Marquis Judeon, will be acting as our official representative. Also accompanying us will be the Royal Magician, Lord Actini, and an envoy of Imperial Guards.”

“I see...”

“What’s wrong, Bel? Don’t you want to go?” Charles frowned with concern as he noted my unexcited expression.

“...No, that’s not it. It’s just so sudden! I’m a bit shocked, is all.”

“This will be your first time stepping out onto the international scene, Bel. But there’s no need to be nervous! I’ll be right there with you.”

“Right, of course. Thank you, Charles.”

To be honest, no, I didn’t want to go.

The Sunruta prince-apparent, Daniel, had been my fiancé during my previous life. His full name was Daniel Burleque. He locked me up in a jail cell and threw away the key the last time I saw him. Who’d ever want to go and celebrate the coronation of a man like that?

I wasn’t sure I’d be able to fake a convincing sense of jubilation. Actually, I felt so scared about going that my knees were starting to tremble.

But I knew there was no way to avoid going.

Besides, I’d already sworn to myself that I’d change my fate and have a happy future with Ed this time.

I silently chided myself for being frightened, wiped away my frown, and put on a happy smile. Charles sighed with relief to see me back to my usual self again.

“Well, I have to be heading off. As soon as I can get my official duties done, I’m going to have a sword practice session with Dohle. There’s still so much I don’t know yet! I really need to get some serious studying done, too...”

“You always study so hard,” I remarked.

“Yep! It’s for the good of the kingdom, so I’m happy to do it, too.” Charles

noded and grinned.

After graduating from Grail Academy, Dohle had taken up a position as Charles's personal guardian knight. Every now and then, the two would spar in the sword-fighting practice ring.

Charles was always destined to inherit the throne once he came of age, but that didn't stop him from giving everything he did his best effort.

Actually, Charles's diligence was one of his most redeeming features. Being a good student and constant hard worker meant that the kingdom's subjects all felt like he'd become a monarch they could believe in.

When I told Charles as much, his eyes widened in surprise and he blushed. He may've been a splendid prince already. But he *was* still only seventeen years old. That boyish, embarrassed grin of his was infectious and made me smile right back.

"Give it your all, Big Brother!"

"Thank you. I will."

I watched as Charles left the room then picked up the envelope that was lying on the table. Flipping it over, I could see that it'd been sealed with a red wax seal showing the Sunruta Kingdom's royal crest of arms.

"I wonder why this invitation came, anyway?"

As I gazed at the crest of arms, I felt a heavy mood settle over me.

Slicing under the seal with a letter opener, I withdrew the invitation inside. It was written on a stiff piece of paper, folded twice. I froze as I scanned the page.

Just as Charles had said, it was a personal invitation to the coronation of Daniel, prince-apparent to the Sunruta Kingdom's throne.

But that wasn't what'd taken my breath away. It was the personal message scrawled at the bottom of the letter. It slanted slightly to the right and was clearly written in a different hand to the fancy calligraphy of the official text above it.

"I am eager to see you in person, Princess Annabel. I will make sure to have the palace decorated with beautiful dahlias to greet you when you arrive."

Dahlias. My favorite flower.

I'd first met Daniel at a party in my previous timeline, where our engagement was decided. It was my coming-of-age party when I'd turned sixteen.

Daniel was nineteen then and had come to foster good relations between the Sunruta Kingdom and Najir. That was when he proposed marriage to me.

After Daniel had learned of my love for dahlias, he'd made it a habit to send me regular bouquets of the beautiful flowers. He'd sent them to me every day during his time here and had kept sending bouquets along with his letters after returning to the Sunruta Kingdom.

This slanted, scrawled handwriting looked extremely similar to the handwriting I remembered from his letters back then.

Did Charles, or Daddy, or someone else who knows about my love for dahlias tell Daniel? How could he know such a private thing about me?

I suddenly began to panic that there'd been private talks between Najir and Sunruta behind my back. Talks of marriage between Daniel and me.

Forget it! I am NOT marrying him! Not in THIS timeline!

I realized I was clenching my fist, accidentally crumpling up the invitation.

I refused to suffer the same fate again.

Besides, I'd sworn myself to Ed. I was going to wait for him.

So there was no way I was getting engaged to Daniel!

I looked down at the crumpled invitation again. Apparently, the coronation ceremony was due to be held in two months.

I won't let things go wrong this time. I swear it!

I bit my lip and stared at the invitation until the text began to blur.



THE following day, I sought out Claude as soon I arrived at Grail Academy.

As I hurried into the classroom, Claude's back visibly stiffened as he quickly suppressed a lazy yawn.

“Hey, Claude. I’d like to ask you about something.”

“Of course, what is it?”

Claude dropped his bag onto his desk as he responded. It made a heavy clunking sound like it was full of books.

Naturally, I wanted to ask Claude about yesterday’s invitation.

Claude was the eldest son and heir of Marquis Judeon. The Judeons had been serving as prominent diplomats to Najir for many years. *I should be able to get some valuable intel on Daniel’s coronation from Claude.*

My logic was that Claude must know why Daniel sent me an invitation. His proximity to Marquis Judeon would give him access to the entire diplomatic intel network.

Incidentally, Claude was all set to succeed the Marquis in business. After he graduated, he’d go into politics, specializing in diplomacy and international relations. It was already decided.

“I received an invitation. It’s really weird...”

“‘Weird?’ I wouldn’t say that? Prominent royals from other countries all received similar invites. It sounds par for the course to me.” Claude tilted his head to the side and looked at me in confusion.

I gulped, unsure what to say next.

Of course, if other prominent royals from foreign lands had all received invitations, then there really wasn’t anything so strange about me getting one too. *Perhaps the ceremony is different from the one in my last life...?*

“All the other countries got one?”

“That’s what I heard. At the very least, I *do* know that Nigren got invitations. My uncle’s the ambassador, so I know that for a fact.”

“Nigren...”

The mention of that land made my face grow stiff.

Nigren was the homeland of the absolute witch who’d thrown me in jail in my last life: Princess Karina. Was *she* to attend the coronation as well? As if Daniel

being there wasn't bad enough... The two of them had conspired to destroy my life...

"So, you got an invitation too. You're so lucky!" Claude exclaimed. "I wanted to go, but it wasn't to be. I'm looking forward to your coming-of-age ceremony, though, Bel! I heard they're already drawing up the guestlist for that."

"Yeah..."

Najir holds coming-of-age ceremonies at sixteen, and my ceremony was due to be held soon, after my next birthday. In my past life, my coming-of-age ceremony was where Daniel and I'd first met.

As it happens, the ceremony would be held shortly after I graduated from Grail Academy. Claude should be starting his new job as a government official by then. It sounded like he was already looking forward to it.

After that, Claude began talking excitedly about all the important people he hoped to meet, and I realized that I wouldn't learn anything more from him.



I couldn't just leave the invitation unanswered, no matter how much I wanted to. So, as soon as I got home from school that day, I headed straight to my desk.

In the end, all I wrote as my reply was: *"Thank you for the invitation. I would be delighted to attend."* And I left it at that. Since I didn't even know *why* I'd been invited in the first place, I didn't want to write anything unnecessary.

"All right, that's done."

I closed the envelope and stamped it with my royal seal. Then I got to my feet, holding the envelope. I wanted to take it straight to Charles before I forgot.

Now that he'd come of age and was acting in his official capacity as the prince, Charles could usually be found in the Royal Palace's official wing. It was situated away from the private wing, where I spent my time. I decided to walk over there to deliver the envelope myself.

As I walked along the breezy, covered walkway, passing white stone benches, I looked out across the gorgeous, well-tended gardens.

Several young girls and women were milling about in the gardens, here to visit

the royal court.

Among them, I noticed...

"Lietta, *please*. I'm on duty."

"But I just had to see you! It's been eight days since last we met!"

The young girl, Lietta, looked as if she'd been crying.

Young lovers?

It looked like she'd come to the palace trying to see her boyfriend, who was too busy at work to make time for her.

"Lietta..."

The man seemed unsure of how to handle the situation. He had his back to me so I couldn't see his face, but he wore a white knight's uniform, so I knew he was a member of the Imperial Guard. He took the girl in his arms and brought his face down to hers, but the girl noticed me watching them over his shoulder and suddenly stiffened.

Then she quickly pushed the man away.

He turned to look over his shoulder and froze when he saw me. The color seemed to drain from his face as he quickly knelt before me.

"Your Highness! I *deeply* apologize for what you just witnessed."

It looked like I'd disturbed a lovers' tryst.

I hadn't meant to intrude. Instantly, I felt guilty.

"It's all right. You were here first, after all. And everyone needs a break, even when they're on duty. But I think you should find a more secluded spot for your talk. You're in full view of the walkway from here."

Awkwardly, I gestured at the covered walkway. It was a public walkway, available for anyone's use. The two of them exchanged guilty looks. Then the man took the girl's hand.

"I'll find some time and come to your house tonight. I'm sorry you've been feeling lonely."

“Do you swear it?”

“Yes, I swear.”

Then the man let go of her hand and disappeared back into the palace, giving me a polite bow as he passed. He must’ve been returning to his post. The girl, Lietta, was beaming with happiness.

After the man disappeared, I turned back around to head to my destination once more. Lietta was still gazing in the direction of her lover, clutching a lace handkerchief in her hand. Then she noticed me watching her and quickly dipped into a curtsy.

“Your Highness, I do apologize for that! I promise that Hendrick never usually abandons his post! He’s so dedicated to the job!”

“Oh, it’s all right! Is he your boyfriend?”

I waved away Lietta’s apologies. It was obvious she was frightened that I’d have them both punished. But of course I had no such intentions.

“Oh, yes. We’ve been friends since we were little and he proposed this spring! We’re going to be married next year!”

“How wonderful! Congratulations to you!” I smiled at Lietta, and she blushed pink, looking down at her feet.

Her reaction was so cute. It really lifted my spirits to see it.



WHEN I arrived at Charles’s office, I could hear voices coming from inside. I couldn’t make out the conversation, but it sounded like a meeting of some sort.

“Shall I announce you, Your Highness?” The attending guard addressed me from his post in front of the doors.

“No, it’s all right. I’ll come back later.”

It might be a really important meeting.

I could always give Charles the letter after dinner. I resolved to just come back later.

As I turned to go, I caught a glimpse of someone from the corner of my eye.

Someone wearing a black robe. The uniform of the Royal Magician.

“That reminds me. Maybe I’ll go see Ed...”

The Royal Magical Research Laboratory’s wing was located right next to the Official Wing. It wasn’t too far from where I currently was.

It actually took me about ten minutes to find my way there. As I stepped into the Magical Research Laboratory for the first time, I found myself gazing around in wonder. The floor was all flagstone and the walls were built of gray stone in the same color. There were numerous doors and a magical globe hung from the ceiling, illuminating the place.

“I wonder where Ed’s room is?”

Everyone seemed to be shut up in their assigned rooms at the moment. The corridor was completely empty.

After wandering around for a few minutes, I decided to just try calling out to see if he would answer.

“Ed!”

My voice echoed down the silent hallway.

As I waited, there was a clattering sound as one of the doors opened.

Ed’s head poked out from around the doorframe and I relaxed. How lucky that I’d been able to locate him so quickly! But Ed seemed taken aback to see me there. He simply gazed at me with his mouth open for a few seconds.

“What’s wrong, Ed? You should see your face!”

“P-Princess? What are you doing here?!”

“I was nearby, so I decided to drop in. I actually went to see Charles, but he was a bit tied up.”

Hanging onto the doorknob, Ed quickly looked up and down the hallway to make sure no one was watching. Then he quickly ushered me inside.

I’d never been in Ed’s research chamber before. It resembled Grail Academy’s Magic Practice Room. Only, it was a lot smaller; only really big enough for drawing one Magic Sigil. The tables against the walls were laden with flasks,

beakers, scales, and magical ingredients of all kinds.

“This *is* a surprise...you’ve never been here before. Have you, Princess?”

“Nope! I just felt like seeing you, though.”

Actually, witnessing that little scene between those two lovers had been what sparked it.

Ed and I...had feelings for each other. Of that, I was now certain.

But Ed and I couldn’t enjoy little trysts in the garden like Lietta and Hendrick. The best we could do would be to stroll through the grounds together, keeping a modest distance as we walked.

Because I was a princess. This country’s *only* princess. And Ed was the second son of a duke with no peerage of his own to inherit. He was merely a Royal Magician.

Of course, being a Royal Magician *was* a splendid job. Becoming one meant that one attained the official title of “Royal Magician” and noble social standing. However, this social standing was on the same level as that of a Magic Knight or a member of the Imperial Guard and couldn’t be handed down to one’s children. Nor was it on the same social level as that of a natural-born aristocrat.

In other words, Ed didn’t have enough social status to get engaged to a princess.

“Princess? Is something amiss?” Ed was blinking, surprised by my sudden desire to see him.

“...I want to go on a date. With *you*.”

A book fell to the floor with a thud.

Ed frowned slightly, gazing at me.

“Princess...”

I blinked, suddenly realizing what I was doing. The *last* thing I wanted was to cause trouble for Ed.

“I’m so sorry, Ed! I didn’t mean to put you in a difficult spot. I just saw this young couple in the gardens, and it made me really envious.”

“I wish I could walk freely arm in arm around the grounds with you, as well.”

“...Really?”

“I assure you it’s true.”

Ed lifted the corners of his mouth in a smile, his gaze shifting to one of the tables in the corner of the room.

“The great magician Longile was gifted indeed. But there were magical arts even he could never completely master. One of them was the art of Illusion.”

“Illusion...?”

“Yes. Take a look at this.”

Ed walked over to the table and picked up a paperweight used to keep documents in order. He offered it to me.

“What does this look like?”

“Looks like a paperweight to me.”

It was an everyday, nondescript paperweight. It was made of heavy metal and resembled a cylinder cut in half. Easy to grab and pick up.

Ed began muttering an incantation, holding the paperweight in his hand. Then the object started to let off a dull glow that seemed to concentrate and grow brighter, then...

“Wow! That’s amazing!” I blinked, wide-eyed with surprise.



It'd been an ordinary paperweight a few moments before. But now, it'd turned into a glass apple.

"This is an Illusion. I've been working on it, using the research notes Longile left behind. So far, I can perform it on inorganic matter, as long as it's about this size or smaller."

"That's an Illusion?"

I reached out and nervously picked up the glass apple.

It felt hard and smooth in my hand and looked exactly like an apple made of glass.

"I hope to be able to perform it on humans within a year."

"On humans?"

"You and me."

I blinked up at Ed.

Does he mean...

"...You want to make us look like different people, so we can go on a date?"

"Would that displease you?"

Ed looked down at me, raising one eyebrow.

I gazed up at him for a few more moments, breathlessly. The prospect excited me. I found myself grinning.

"It would please me very much! Hehe! I can hardly wait!"

Disguising ourselves to go on a secret date! It's like something from a romance novel...!

Ed narrowed his eyes in pleasure, drinking in my excited response.

"Ultimately, I want to create a Magic Sigil that non-magic users can even use."

"Non-magic users?"

"Right! You gave me the idea. Do you recall back before you could use magic, when you asked if there were any Magic Sigils that even you could use?"

Come to think of it, I recalled saying something like that before.

Back then, I was completely unable to conjure magic, no matter how hard I tried. I found it frustrating to have to keep practicing drawing Magic Sigils that I couldn't even use.

I'd complained to Ed, muttering about how unfair it was that a person couldn't even use the Magic Sigils she'd painstakingly drawn.

"As you suggested, the invention of such a Magic Sigil would revolutionize the age, allowing anyone across the world to wield magic. Wouldn't that be a groundbreaking invention?"

"It would. Worthy of a Magic Count, perhaps?" I gazed deeply into Ed's eyes. He grinned a little in response.

"Perhaps. But at the moment, I'm not getting any conclusive results. I believe it might work if you infused the Magic Sigil with magical power. Magical power infusion research is really coming along. But the practical application is still a long way off."

"I see..."

I'd been hoping Ed was close to becoming a Magic Count already, but it seemed like that wasn't the case. My face fell.

"It will only be a few years, at most."

"Okay."

Ed reached out to stroke my hair soothingly.

I gazed up at him.

He seems taller...

"Ed...you've grown again..."

"Yes, I know. I wonder when I'll stop."

"Hmm, you still have a way to go..."

"You think so?" Ed looked at me in confusion, but I just grinned.

In the last timeline, Ed had been a full head taller than me. He still had about

two inches left to go.

“You say the *strangest* things with such confidence sometimes, Princess.”

“Do I?”

“You *do*. For example, you were so certain that I’d improve my swordfighting skills.”

Ah, I nodded.

I *had* said something like that.

Because after all, the Edoile Licht La Boulacherie I knew had been a master swordfighter.

“Perhaps you can see into our future, Princess?”

Ed leaned in to peer at me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. I could see the weight of expectation in those red eyes. I felt a twinge of painful emotion deep in my chest.

I *had* seen a future between Ed and me already. And it hadn’t been a happy one.

“You’ll become a Magic Count, and you’ll come for me. And then you’ll take my hand, just like a prince.” I grinned, holding my hand out to Ed so that we could act out the scene.

It wasn’t a prediction, though. It was a wild hope. My greatest dream. If only it would come true.

Ed took my hand, his eyes softening, as if he were greatly pleased by my answer.

“By the way, what did you need to see Prince Charles about?”

“I wanted to give him a letter. But he was in a meeting.”

“You wanted to give him a letter?”

“Uh-huh. I got an invitation from the Sunruta Kingdom. Prince Daniel’s invited me to his coronation ceremony.” I pulled the letter from my bag, shrugging.

“Prince Daniel? From the Sunruta Kingdom?”

A look of concern flashed across Ed's face.

Right now, there were plenty of young princes in Najir's neighboring countries, but Daniel was the closest to me in age and the direct heir to his country's throne. He was clearly the front-runner of possible marriage candidates for me.

Perhaps Ed was worried that this upcoming event would serve as a basis for marriage negotiations between Daniel and me.

A pleasant breeze blew in through the open window, ruffling the white lace curtains.

I could see the blue sky outside. It reminded me of a certain memory. A warm and happy one.

"That blue sky...even in the Sunruta Kingdom, the skies are connected..."

In our old timeline, Ed said something like that to me. He was trying to bolster my spirits in that dank jail cell.

"While I'm in the Sunruta Kingdom, whenever I start to miss you, I'll just look up at the sky," I said, taking a page out of his book. "That way, even though we're apart, we can both look up at the same sky."

Ed blinked several times in surprise, then his expression softened. Looking up out of the window, he squinted against the sun's brightness.

2. Daniel's Coronation Ceremony

THE day of Prince Daniel's coronation ceremony soon arrived.

I stared at the gloomy-faced girl in the mirror, sighing deeply. I'd been sighing all day.

"Princess Annabel, don't you like it?" Ellie was gazing at me in concern. She'd been helping me get dressed.

"It's not that. It's really nice. Thank you, Ellie. I just feel a bit tired from being in a strange place."

I quickly composed myself and gave Ellie a smile.

In truth, Ellie had dressed me perfectly.

She'd chosen a lavender-purple chiffon dress with many layers and intricate lacework on the bodice. It was colorful and cute. The perfect dress for a princess.

The top half of my hair was pinned up and the bottom half had been curled. On the right side of my head, I had a hairpin with lavender-purple stones.

"It *was* a very long trip, wasn't it? Prince Charles should be here to pick you up soon. Should I tell him you aren't feeling well?"

"No, it's okay. Sorry I worried you."

I waved dismissively and turned my back to Ellie. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. It wasn't feeling unwell that had me so despondent. I just didn't want to participate in the dinner party that was about to be held.

We'd arrived in the Sunruta Kingdom two days ago as guests for Prince Daniel's official Princely Coronation Ceremony. Since then, we'd been staying in guest quarters in the Sunruta Royal Palace. I'd been doing my best not to go out, so I hadn't even caught a glimpse of Daniel or Karina yet. But I couldn't get out of attending this banquet.

It's all right. This world and my old world are not the same.

Or so I kept telling myself as I clenched my shaking hands into fists. I reached up and rolled my Magic Stone between my fingers. It made me feel more relaxed, somehow. Gazing out the window, I could see the orange-colored sunset sky.

Is Ed gazing up at the sky right now too, thinking of me?

My nerves made me wish I could be with him more than ever, but a great physical distance separated us. Ed could use transportation magic, but no one could travel such great, international distances without using a really huge Magic Sigil.

All of a sudden, a loud knock on the door seemed to make the entire room shake.

"It must be your brother."

I checked the clock and nodded at Ellie before calling out "Come in!" toward the closed door. It opened with a rasping sound.

As the door opened, I watched in the mirror. But someone unexpected entered, and my eyes widened in shock.

He stood behind me, nut-brown hair neatly tied back, eyes as blue as a frozen winter sky. He had a regal-looking nose and thin lips with tidy eyebrows. I could *never* have forgotten that face. It was...

"...Prince Daniel."

"You know who I am! That pleases me very much." Daniel smiled at me and started walking closer. I was still too frozen with shock to move. "Welcome to the Sunruta Kingdom, Princess Annabel. I am this country's heir apparent, Daniel Burleque. What a pleasure it is to make your acquaintance."

Daniel took my hand as I stood there paralyzed. He pressed a kiss to the back of it.

"Wh-Why...?"

Why was Daniel here? What was he *doing*?

Daniel chuckled, smiling at me as I continued to stand there, wide-eyed.

"I received permission from Prince Charles to escort you in his stead. He has gone to pick up Princess Karina instead."

"...Oh..."

I couldn't think of anything else to say.

I wish Charles would have told me about this arrangement beforehand.

Daniel watched me shrewdly, taking in my evasive expression. Finally, he spoke.

"Are you ready to go?"

"...Yes."

Daniel suddenly tugged me by the hand he was still holding. I stumbled against him.

"Hello, Princess Annabel."

As Daniel brought his face close to mine, I realized that I hadn't even introduced myself yet. I was being very rude to the prince of our host kingdom.

And why was he holding me so close?

*We're **not** engaged. Back off!*

In a panic, I reared backward, managing to create some distance.

"Hello, Prince Daniel! I am Annabel Nalia Gottenheim, princess of the kingdom of Najir. I apologize for my rudeness. I'm afraid that in all the excitement, I've seemingly lost my tongue."

I lowered my head, grasping the folds of my dress in a curtsy.

"No worries," he said from above me. "I heard from Prince Charles that this is your first time traveling outside your country. You must be very tired. I hope your quarters are comfortable?"

"Very comfortable, thank you."

"That's good. If you need anything, tell our royal maids immediately. I *do* hope that you will enjoy the banquet this evening."

Daniel narrowed his ice-blue eyes. Then he held his hand out to me. I placed mine in his and he began escorting me out of the room.

“Oh! Dahlias...”

As we walked down the corridor, I couldn't help noticing the vases of beautiful dahlias. My little gasp seemed to reach Daniel's ears, and he too looked over at the pretty flowers with their big, round heads.

“You like these flowers, don't you? I had them put up all over for the duration of your stay, hoping to make you feel at ease.”



I blinked.

In his letter, he'd said something about decorating the palace with dahlias. So, *he actually went and did it...*

It was clear that Daniel had taken great pains to help me feel at home.

How happy I would've been with a gesture like that, back when I was still so naïve and knew nothing.

But knowing the horrible fate that'd ensued before, Daniel's kind gesture made me feel sick. I was starting to think that engagement talks must be going on in the background for us for real.

I couldn't forget how he'd changed in the blink of an eye and become a complete monster.

Which one of them is the real Daniel, though?

I looked up at his refined face searchingly. He noticed my gaze and looked down at me. When our eyes met, he gave me a soft smile.

Daniel led me to one of the Sunruta Kingdom Royal Palace's many dining halls.

It wasn't that big. But the tall ceilings gave it a spacious feel. The main dining hall would've been too big for the number of guests invited, so this one had been selected instead.

There were about twenty people seated along the long dining hall table. Many of them were royals from other countries. As Daniel escorted me into the room, they stopped chattering and quickly got to their feet.

"Feel free to sit down and relax; not everyone's here yet! But *this* is Princess Annabel from the land of Najir." With a gentle smile, Daniel waved at the guests, encouraging them to sit back down.

Clearing my throat, I introduced myself as well, as custom dictates. "Greetings. I am Princess Annabel Nalia Gottenheim of Najir."

I could feel the guests' piercing eyes on me even as I gazed straight past them. Being escorted by Daniel, the host of this event, indicated that I was somebody

important to him. If not his official fiancé then, at the very least, there were romantic feelings here, on one side or the other. *That's what everyone must be thinking.*

As I stood there awkwardly, someone spoke up with a voice as clear as a ringing bell. "Oh! Is *that* Princess Annabel?" the voice said, and I looked up. "Hello, Princess Annabel! I've been *dying* to meet you! I really hope that you and I will become good friends."

I gazed at the girl in surprise as she rose from her seat and came over to me, smiling. She looked about my age. I was completely taken aback.

She had beautiful, braided red hair.

Her eyes, shaded by thick lashes, were sparkling green, like emeralds. Her alabaster skin was tinged prettily with pink.

And she was smiling at me like she really *was* delighted to meet me... *But...*

"Bel, this is Princess Karina of Nigren. She's my age, so only a year older than you. It would be great for you to have a friend from one of our neighboring countries. I hope you'll get along with her."

Charles also approached me, smiling. He'd already been seated at the table when we came in. Beside him, the girl smiled bashfully.

"My name is Karina Niquist."

She lowered her head gracefully and executed a perfect curtsy.

I still couldn't move, though. I was frozen to the spot.

This woman—this innocently smiling woman—was Karina Niquist. The Princess of Nigren. The woman who'd ruined and imprisoned me in my past life. The devilish she-witch herself.

Fear mixed with anger came bubbling up inside me.

Get along with her?

*I'd rather eat dirt than be friends with someone like **you!***

"Princess Annabel?"

Karina's face began to fall as she realized I wasn't saying anything and was

simply staring at her sharply. I watched as she tilted her head, looking to my brother for assistance.

“This is Bel’s first time out of our country and she’s very nervous. She may come off as prickly, but I assure you, there’s no ill intention. I *do* hope you’ll take her under your wing, Karina.” Charles hurried to appease her on my behalf.

“Ah.” Princess Karina nodded understandingly. “So, you’re feeling nervous. I was nervous too on my first visit to a foreign country! I felt like my heart was going to leap out of my chest! But don’t worry, you’ll soon get used to things.”

Karina’s eyes glazed over as if she was remembering her own past trials. Then she shook her head and smiled at me again. The other guests chuckled, and the room’s atmosphere lightened up considerably.

I was the only one who remained unsmiling.

“Now that the introductions are taken care of, let’s all take our seats, shall we? I’ve saved a seat next to mine that’s for *you*, Princess Annabel.” Daniel smiled as he directed everyone to take their seats.

I obediently sat where he indicated.

Sitting beside Daniel felt awkward enough. But it was made even worse by Karina being positioned directly opposite me.

“Please, have a seat.”

Daniel pulled out my chair with a flourish. It was a gallant gesture and not something I would’ve been expecting from a prince. I blinked rapidly.

“Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Daniel gave me a twinkling smile and I chewed my lip, unsure whether or not to smile back.

I looked away from Daniel and gazed at the floral centerpieces on the table. From the corner of my eye, I could see Daniel raise a hand to signal the start of the feast, and all of a sudden, the footmen appeared, bringing dish after dish to the table.

The little plate of appetizers in front of me looked gorgeous, like an arrangement of jewels.

I cut a tiny piece and brought it to my mouth. Rich flavors spilled over my tongue.

“Does it suit your palate, Princess?”

I blinked, jaws still chewing, and looked up at Daniel, who was gazing sideways at me.

“Yes, it’s very delicious.”

“I *am* pleased to hear that. I’ll have to let the chefs know. They’d be delighted to see you captivated by their cooking like that.”

I looked down at my plate. Too nervous to make small talk, I’d tried to lose myself in eating. Now my plate was almost completely empty.

I had the feeling Daniel had been watching every bite I took.

I looked up to see my brother chatting animatedly with Princess Karina from across the table.



CROWN Prince Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom was officially crowned in a solemn ceremony, which proceeded smoothly from start to finish.

It was called a coronation. But, of course, Daniel wasn’t becoming king. Instead, he was officially accepted as the rightful prince and heir apparent.

I’d been expecting a basic, no-fuss ceremony. But it was much grander and more elaborate than I ever could’ve anticipated.

And, in the short space of time I was able to observe him, it was clear to me that Daniel was well-loved by his people.

Commoners weren’t permitted to witness the coronation, of course. But they’d gathered in droves outside the palace gates, where they could be heard cheering. Wearing a modest crown that was smaller and less elaborate than the king’s, Daniel looked every inch the gallant, noble, people’s prince.

There was so much applause for him. So much cheering.

Everyone was smiling, joy evident on their faces.

I smiled a little as I watched Daniel wave to his subjects, feeling like a lost child left behind. Then Daniel turned, his eyes searching before locating me. He softened his eyes just a little, smiling.

Did he just...smile at me?

I heard my heart pounding in my ears as I quickly looked away.

When I looked back, Daniel was facing away from me once more, waving at the crowd again.

3. Sunruta Kingdom's Magic Research Laboratory

I spent the next day in my room at the palace in a bum mood.

How did things end up playing out this way?

I kept thinking about things and sighing. Then thinking about things. Then sighing.

I got to my feet and walked over to the window. The blue sky outside was dotted with puffy white clouds, like cotton candy. Resting my hands on the windowsill, I watched as they slowly floated right to left.

Then I sighed again.

I was disappointed with how...*timid* I'd been ever since we'd arrived in the Sunruta Kingdom.

I was the princess of a kingdom. In the future, I would need to make connections with foreign countries. I'd need to be able to stand as a representative of Najir. But I hadn't been able to do anything worthwhile during my time here so far. I'd just stayed shut up in my room instead.

If I wanted to avoid marriage with Daniel, it'd be in my best interest to create friendships with the other foreign royals. But I was too afraid to go walking around the palace grounds, in case I ran into Daniel or Karina.

Wow...I'm really pathetic...

As I stood gazing at the sky and feeling bad about myself, there was a knock at the door behind me.

"Yes?"

Wondering who that could be, I went to answer the door. My eyes widened in shock as I took in the sight of the unexpected guest standing in the doorway.

"Good day to you, Princess Annabel."

"Princess Karina?"

It was Princess Karina.

Shocked stiff, I simply stood there holding the doorknob. Karina gave me a soft smile.

“You know, I recently had the opportunity to try some of the most delicious tea. Would you like to have some with me?”

Karina was holding a tray, on top of which sat a beautiful tea set with a floral pattern. The teacups were filled with an amber liquid that gave off curls of steam.

The steam brought a familiar scent to my nose.

“Is that...Dimple tea?”

“*Hmm?* You know of it? I actually tasted it for the first time just yesterday! It has strong floral notes; I’ve really quite taken to it!”

Dimple tea is a black tea grown in the Sunruta Kingdom’s Dimple region. Various petals are dried along with the tea leaves, making for a very distinctive floral tea.

Now why did I know about Dimple tea? Well, in my old timeline, when I’d lived in the Sunruta Kingdom as Daniel’s fiancé, I drank it all the time. It was my absolute favorite.

But Karina didn’t seem to know anything about that. She was just standing there genially smiling at me. If she’d sent a note inviting me to have tea first, that would be one thing. But to bring the tea herself...I couldn’t possibly say no to her like this.

I nodded to Ellie, who was standing at attention in my room, and led Karina and her tea set over to the table.

“How are you feeling about being abroad for the first time? Are you still nervous?”

“No...”

I wasn’t sure what to say to her. My response came out sounding very abrupt.

On the other hand, Karina seemed unconcerned as she sipped her tea and

started telling me about her own first trip abroad. Apparently, she'd been to a country across the continent from Najir, where there was no custom of escorting ladies.

"No one offered me their hand, so I just stood there like a spare part! And the others just stood there watching me! It was the most awkward thing you could ever imagine!"

Apparently, Karina had arrived in this country and stepped down from her carriage, but no one had come forward to formally escort her. So, she'd simply stood there and waited. But since Karina was the honored guest, none of the people receiving her were permitted to make a move before she did. So, in the end, they'd all just stood around.

Picturing the scene in my head, I couldn't suppress a burst of laughter.

That must've been extremely awkward indeed!

Karina smiled at me. "Oh, I'm so pleased," she said. "Finally, I get to see you smile!"

"Pardon?"

"You've seemed very down ever since you got here, Princess Annabel, and your brother, Prince Charles, has been ever so worried about you. Prince Daniel has been most concerned as well. I was hoping a spot of tea would cheer you up."

I gazed at Karina. Her smile seemed so genuine and uncalculated. I was honestly shocked.

It made sense for Charles to be worried about me. Daniel too, since he was the host. But why did Karina care?

Why was she worried about me, shutting myself away in my room? Why was *she* trying to do her best to draw me out and help me feel at ease...?

I looked down at the teacups Karina had brought. For a moment, I started to wonder if perhaps she had poisoned mine. Then I felt guilty for thinking such a thing.

Thinking about it more deeply, it made sense that perhaps this world's

Princess Karina and Prince Daniel might be very different from the ones I knew, in the same way that this world's Edoile Licht La Boulacherie was so different from the old timeline.

That thought finally helped me begin to relax for the first time since coming here.

Karina was only a year older than I was. And we were *both* Princesses. With so much in common, it perhaps wasn't surprising that we were soon chatting away like old friends.

Karina was just telling me about a dress she'd had custom-made when there was another knock at the door.

I certainly was getting a lot of visitors today.

But since Karina was here, I instead asked Ellie to answer the door. When she opened it to check who was there, she suddenly looked panicked and trotted back over to me.

"Princess Annabel, Prince Daniel is here to see you."

"Prince Daniel?"

What is Daniel doing here?

I couldn't even begin to guess. Turning to Karina, I could see in her eyes that she didn't know anything about his visit, either. She shook her head softly. In the meantime, Daniel had already walked into the room. When he saw Karina and me sitting down to a pot of tea together, his eyebrows shot up.

"Good day to you, Prince Daniel. May we help you?" I got to my feet at once and attempted a proper greeting.

Daniel was dressed in loose-fitting yet aristocratic attire, very different from the splendid coronation suit he'd worn last night.

"I *do* apologize for barging in. Please, sit back down and relax." Daniel gestured for me to return to my seat. "I heard that Princess Karina was here. I thought it perfect timing to make a visit of my own."

"Er...you did?" I blinked at him, not following.

“Indeed, since you’ve come all this way, I thought you should know a bit more about my country. To start, I would love to show you around our state-of-the-art Magic Research Lab. Would you like to see it? I heard that Najir is a land replete with magical energy. I would love to get your opinions on it.”

“I...I would love to see it, yes!”

The moment I heard the words “Magic Research Lab.” I knew what my answer had to be.

I’d read about the Sunruta Kingdom’s recently developed Magic Research laboratory in a book Claude had lent me. He brought it over when I was in disgrace, confined to my room by Daddy after I’d gone into town by myself after dark. I’d had to take some time off from Grail Academy, and I’d been so bored.

But there’d been no Magic Research Lab in Sunruta when I’d come here to marry Daniel in my old timeline. The lab represented a significant discrepancy between timelines. For that reason, it seemed important.

“I’m so glad that it interests you. Princess Karina, what say you?”

Daniel smiled at me, then shifted his gaze to Karina. She batted her eyes, her face lighting up.

“The Magic Research Laboratory? That sounds fascinating. If Princess Annabel is going, I’d certainly like to come along as well.”

“Then it’s decided. But there are only a few days remaining before you both return to your homelands. We should do it as soon as possible. How about this afternoon?”

“That would be fine with me,” Karina said.

“I don’t have any other plans either,” I added.

“Excellent. I’ll reach out to Charles as well. I’ll call for you both at your chambers this afternoon at two o’clock.”

“Thank you.”

Karina and I both thanked Daniel, who smiled at us both. “Until later, then,” he said, leaving the room.



WHEN Daniel escorted us to the Magic Research Lab, I found it was very similar to Najir's.

It was located in its own building, separate from the palace, and was equipped with rooms for the resident researchers to pursue their own fields of interest. It was a much smaller operation than Najir's, probably because Sunruta had far fewer magic users than we did.

I wonder what was here in my old timeline?

I scoured through my memory banks, but nothing stood out to me.

"We're researching ways to distribute the same Magic Sigils and other magical tools you use in Najir throughout the Sunruta Kingdom. We expect them to be available for our citizens' convenient use at some point soon," Daniel said, explaining their research as he looked around.

Daniel had invited some other visiting royals besides us, and they were all looking around with curiosity. But Daniel seemed more concerned with what my brother, Charles, thought. Najir is known throughout the world for its rich magic, so I guessed he wanted to get Charles's take on things in particular.

"So you're not working on developing any new forms of magic?" I looked around the lab as I posed this question.

The Najir lab was mainly focused on developing and testing new forms of magic. I'd assumed the Sunruta lab would've been used for the same purpose.

"As it happens, we are."

"Like what?"

"Oh, this and that. We're mostly focused on defensive magic."

"Defensive?"

"Yes."

Daniel stopped in front of one of the rooms as he led us down the corridor and addressed the man standing inside. The man was dressed in a black robe.

The man nodded and passed Daniel a Magic Crystal. It looked like a Magic

Stone, but it couldn't recharge itself like a real stone could. It was meant for storing magic, for the use of people with little magical power of their own. While holding the crystal, they could draw on the magical power already imbued inside it. The robed man then began chanting.

With a muted zinging sound, a defensive wall of magical power sprung up all around Daniel.

"Wow, that's not half bad." Charles rubbed his chin, looking on with interest.

"What? What's not half bad?" Karina asked.

It seemed like she couldn't see the magic wall, lacking any magical ability of her own. She didn't even know what had happened. Most of the other royals seemed equally clueless.

"Want to try throwing a light attack my way?"

Daniel looked straight at Charles. Charles, in turn, looked at me.

It was like he was saying, "You're up, Bel."

"...Princess Annabel, you can use magic as well?"

Daniel was looking at me with surprise. It was clear he'd been aware of Charles' magical prowess, but the fact that I could use magic too seemed to be news to him.

"*A princess who can't even use magic...*" I could still hear that derogative voice in my head, spitting those words like venom. I found myself scowling.

"Of *course* I can," I sniffed. "I'm the princess of Najir."

"...I see. Of course. Well, Princess Annabel, will you take a shot at it?"

I hesitated.

I could handle conjuring up a little light magical attack, for sure. But if Daniel's defensive magic didn't work for some reason, he could be hurt. That would cause a major diplomatic issue.

Daniel grinned wryly, immediately guessing the reason behind my hesitance.

"There's no need to worry. The spell has been rigorously tested. As long as you don't shoot to kill, I promise I won't even feel a tickle."

“I won’t.”

“Then why not try it? If you *do* somehow happen to injure me, I promise I won’t have you held accountable.”

Daniel chuckled. But I still hesitated and looked at Charles. He gave me a small nod. “Go ahead,” he seemed to say.

“Very well, then. If you’ll permit me...”

I gathered my magical energy within myself, then shot it through my hands.

“Ice Crystal Shower.”

A shower of sharp crystals shot through the air towards Daniel.

It was a light spell, and I was confident that, even if my magic made contact with Daniel, he’d only be scratched and bruised by the crystals’ impact.

But I needn’t have worried. The crystals bounced harmlessly off Daniel’s defensive wall without a single shard making contact.

The other royals in our party all gasped and stiffened in horror. It was only a light magic spell, but it did look quite impressive, as if a small blizzard had come swirling down the hallway.

“Impressive!”

Daniel grinned in triumph after deflecting my attack, and Charles gave him a round of applause.

“A little attack like that is nothing.”

“Then how about we see how strong of an attack that spell can actually manage to deflect? My sister isn’t really much of a specialist in offense magic. Me, on the other hand...”

“That sounds like fun. Let’s give it a go later on.”

Charles and Daniel laughed together.

Daniel handed the Magic Crystal back to the magician and started walking off with Charles, the two of them chatting away like old friends.

The others in our party still looked shaken and alarmed, though.

Daniel's really good at getting Charles engaged with him...

They got along so well, it was almost hard to believe they'd never met before. I was secretly quite taken aback.

Now Charles was telling the other royals: "Magic on that level is nothing. Now the really serious attacks, though...our Magic Knights are all specialists in them."

To that, Daniel responded: "Here in Sunruta, we're aiming to bring our magic skills up to that level as soon as we can."

They were both putting on a significant show of force.

After what they'd just witnessed, the royals present on this occasion would surely think twice about attacking either Najir or the Sunruta Kingdom in the future.

"Princess Annabel, that was very impressive! I'd no idea you could do that!"

As she walked along beside me, Karina's cheeks were red with excitement. She'd clearly never seen magic like that before. Even though it really wasn't that impressive of a spell.

"I heard that Nigren's not a magic-oriented country," I commented.

"You're right. We're mostly all non-magical folk. I can't use it either, so I really envy you!"

Karina pouted. I knew how it felt to envy those who could use magic. After all, I couldn't use magic myself for the longest time until my latent powers had finally emerged. *Thanks to her...*

I unconsciously balled my hands into fists.

"Once I get home, I'm going to tell Elena all about what I saw today!"

"Who's Elena?"

"She's the finest witch in all of Nigren! I wish I could've brought her along with me!"

Karina's shoulders slumped a little bit dejectedly.

The finest witch in all of Nigren...now that rang a bell. A long time ago, Claude had told me about a strange breed of magicians—genetic mutations—that'd

suddenly started appearing in Nigren. Elena *had* to be one of them.

“She’s *amazing*! She can replicate any spell, just by watching it being cast once!”

“Wow, that *is* amazing!”

I nodded along as Karina spoke.

I’d never heard of this Elena before, but it turned out that she was a magician about our age. Apparently, she was currently employed at the Nigren Palace.

“Oh, I know! If you’d be so kind as to invite me to your coming-of-age ceremony, Princess Annabel, then perhaps I could bring Elena along? Your country has tons more magic than Sunruta, right?”

“My coming-of-age ceremony?” I paused for a moment. “Oh, of course! Yes, please bring her.”

My ceremony was six months away.

Claude had said that the guest list was being drawn up still. In that case, it probably wasn’t finalized yet.

Up until yesterday, I would’ve been horrified at the prospect of inviting Karina. But this timeline’s Karina seemed nice. I didn’t mind trying to see if there was more to her than the Karina I knew before. As they say, keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Karina beamed at me, her eyes sparkling as I said yes.

4. The Puzzle Box

MY time spent in the Sunruta Kingdom passed in the blink of an eye. I'd been so nervous at first, but now looking back on it, I realized that I'd really enjoyed myself.

I picked up a small box from my luggage and held it in my hand. It was quite heavy, despite how small it was.

I'd been fiddling around with it a bit, but I couldn't get it open. By consulting the manual and trying this and that, I finally opened it. The lid popped off and I gasped a little. It was so complex.

"Amazing..."

The little box with its geometric engravings looked like a simple trinket at a glance. However, it was actually a puzzle box, requiring thirty different steps to open. It was made using traditional Sunruta Kingdom techniques. It was very unusual, so I planned to bring this back to Ed as a souvenir.

"Princess Annabel, may I finish packing for you?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you."

I closed the box in my hand, smiling at Ellie, and then I opened up my trunk. There was a small white accessory box in the trunk. I put away the puzzle box and picked up the white one.

It had the same sort of engravings on the lid as the puzzle box I'd bought for Ed. Immediately, I could see that it was made using the same kind of Sunruta artistry.

I opened the lid to see a small bag of potpourri inside. It gave off a gentle, floral scent. Removing the bag, I looked into the box, and the events of yesterday came flooding back.

Yesterday, after lunch, Daniel had asked me if we could meet and speak in

private.

“Princess Annabel, would you take tea with me before you return to your country?”

Daniel had shown up at my room again unannounced. I was quite flustered. In my old timeline, Daniel had asked me to spend time with him just like this, and that was how we’d gotten acquainted.

“Of course. But shouldn’t you invite Princess Karina, as well?”

Daniel had me cornered, so I couldn’t be impolite. The best I could do was attempt damage control by suggesting that Karina take tea with us as well, to serve as a buffer.

We were the only two eligible young women who’d been invited to Daniel’s coming-of-age ceremony. Since Daniel had publicly escorted me to the banquet the night before his crowning, it’d send the wrong kind of message if he wasn’t seen giving equal attention to Karina. It would look like there was something between us.

But Daniel just chuckled.

“I only *just* took a private walk with Princess Karina. This time, it’s your turn, Princess Annabel.”

“You went on a walk with Princess Karina?”

I was a little surprised by this.

So, that means he must’ve been seen alone in public with Karina. Strolling together...

Now all those people who’d been so sure that Daniel escorting me to the banquet actually meant something...well, they would have to think twice. They’d have to wonder if it wasn’t Karina who’d caught his eye after all. But being seen with two princesses was a major power move and would do a good job of keeping the power-hungry aristocrats in their places as well.

Indeed, being seen with each princess individually would be more advantageous for Daniel than if he’d invited us both to spend time with him on the same occasion.

He's actually pretty sharp...

I'd noticed it the other day when Daniel and my brother had been talking at the Magic Research Lab. Daniel had a quick mind. He always seemed to be weighing the situation, gauging the best course of action.

I invited him over to the table and poured tea for us both. Daniel brought the cup to his lips. Then he smiled.

"Ah, it's Dimple tea."

"Yes. I like this tea very much."

"Then I shall present you with many bags of it as a souvenir."

Smiling, Daniel brought the cup to his lips again.

Daniel and I had often enjoyed this tea together when I was still his treasured fiancé in that old timeline. The memory was a pleasant one. I watched as Daniel sipped his tea, his lashes cast downward.

"How did you enjoy your stay in the Sunruta Kingdom?"

"I enjoyed it very much."

"Did you make it into town at all?"

"A little."

I'd gone to town with Charles just yesterday, in fact. We'd gone to a workshop that makes the puzzle boxes, and it was there that I'd bought my souvenir for Ed. We were able to watch the artisans crafting the puzzle boxes right in front of us. It was terribly fascinating.

Daniel kept smiling the whole time he listened to me talk.

"Also, I made a new friend from a foreign country," I said.

"You did?"

"Princess Karina."

Daniel nodded, then placed his chin in his hand and gazed into the distance, as if thinking deeply about something. "Incidentally, what do *you* think of Princess Karina?"

“What do I...*think* of her? I think she’s cute and friendly. And she’s really nice.”

“I see. I think so, too. She’s a genuine person. There’s no bad side to her. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh, I completely agree.” I nodded earnestly. That was my honest opinion about *this* Karina.

But internally, I was wondering what Daniel was *really* trying to ask me.

Why was he asking me, the princess of Najir, to agree with his glowing praise of Princess Karina of Nigren?

Was he secretly trying to indicate to me that he had feelings for Karina? Or did he know something more...?

“Are you...*romantically* interested in Princess Karina, my prince?” I asked the easier of the two questions running through my mind.

“I must admit...I *do* find her fascinating.”

Daniel said no more. He simply looked at me with his ice-blue eyes and chuckled.

“I find *you* very fascinating, too.”

Please forgive me for my unladylike sneer in response to that! I mean, really, isn’t this all just a bit too...

“I don’t like men who are fascinated by multiple women at once,” I outright told him. “There is nothing worse than a man who claims to love you, only to turn on you once another woman comes along.”

I wasn’t really mad at the present Daniel, though. My ire was meant for the Daniel from my old life.

Daniel’s eyes widened, immediately recognizing I was furious. But the next moment, he snorted with laughter.

“Oh dear, oh dear! You’re very fierce for a princess! I understand. I shall have to make sure I communicate how earnest my intentions are when I make them known.”

“Yes, please do *the girl* that favor at least.”

And please let that girl be someone other than me.

Daniel continued to chuckle, shoulders shaking in amusement as he raised an eyebrow at me. *Did he read my mind just now?*

We must’ve been chatting for close to an hour. Eventually, Daniel seemed to remember something. “Ah, I almost forgot!” he said and pulled something from his pocket.

He placed a small box on the table, just big enough to nestle neatly in my palm. It was painted white, with intricate engravings on its lid.

“What’s this?” I examined it, noting its similarities to the puzzle box I’d bought for Ed yesterday at the artisans’ workshop.

“It’s just a little accessory box. A present from me to Princess Annabel to commemorate your first visit to the Sunruta Kingdom.”

“For *me*?”

I was taken aback as I picked it up. It was a little heavier than it looked, but it wasn’t cumbersome at all. I opened the lid to find a little bag of potpourri inside. Closing the lid again, I stroked the engravings with my fingers. There were little raised marks. Just like the one I’d bought for Ed.

“Is there some...meaning to these engravings?”

“It’s a traditional design from the north of our great country. It’s supposed to represent the wind causing ripples on the water, but I don’t really know the details.”

“I see. Well...thank you.”

I turned the box over to look at the bottom. Then I turned it right-side-up again. It was made of wood and probably wasn’t particularly expensive, so I felt comfortable accepting it. I thanked Daniel for it with honest gratitude.

“The next time we meet, it will be for your coming-of-age party, won’t it, Princess Annabel?”

“Yes, it will.”

I hadn't seen the guest list or anything, but how could the newly recognized crown prince of the Sunruta Kingdom, Daniel Burleque, not be on it? Besides, he'd certainly been in attendance in my last life.

"Let us both look forward to our next meeting, then."

Daniel's expression softened.

"Princess Annabel, shall I pack that away for you as well?"

I jumped in response to the voice. It was Ellie, looking at me with an expression of confusion on her face. *Oh dear, I'm really going to have to stop spacing out like this.*

"Yes, I'll pack it. Thank you, Ellie."

I quickly put the little box away in my trunk. It nestled neatly beside the puzzle box I'd bought Ed. The engravings on the lids were so similar, it almost looked like they were meant to have been sold as a matching set.

"It's almost time for us to depart. I'll just close up this luggage, Princess."

Ellie closed up the trunk and fastened the clasps with a snapping sound. Then she tightened a belt around the trunk to prevent it from rolling around and coming loose in the carriage. Finally, she padlocked it.

I watched her distractedly. It was time to say goodbye to the Sunruta Kingdom. It felt like I'd only just arrived. Yet somehow, it also felt like I'd been there for a very long time.

I walked over to the window, hoping to get one last look at the view. A clear blue sky hung overhead.

Is the weather this good in Najir too?

This blue sky stretched all the way to Najir. As I gazed up at the endless sky, I realized how much I was missing Ed.



A few days later, I arrived safely back in Najir.

I looked at myself in the mirror to check that I looked okay.

My slightly messy hair was pinned up with a hairpin. The gold pin was in the

shape of a bird with a red berry in its mouth. It was one of my favorite accessories lately.

My dress was devoid of ribbons or fussy embellishments, but the bodice had some delicate embroidery, and the sleeves were finished with lace.

Maybe it's a bit too much for everyday wear? Is it okay?

I quickly checked the time. Then I applied another layer of lipstick. It was the same shade of red as the berry on my hairpin. It definitely made my lips pop.

"Princess Annabel, Master La Boulacherie is here."

Ellie's voice made me jump, and I quickly stashed away my lip brush. Then I hurried over and sat delicately down at the table. "Bring him in," I announced.

Ed walked into the room to see me sitting near the window. A gentle smile was playing at his lips.

"Princess. It's been a while."

I wanted to throw myself into his arms, but I restrained myself. "Yes, it has. Have you been well?" I smiled back at him.

Ed walked over to the table, putting the magical reference book he was holding down on it. It was the text we'd been studying together. Ed was still teaching me magic. Today's lesson was to be classroom-based rather than a practical one.

"How was the Sunruta Kingdom?"

"It was really fun."

I thought about it for a moment before answering.

When I first arrived in Sunruta, I was terrified of coming face-to-face with Daniel and Karina. But they were both so different from their old timeline counterparts. Once I realized that, I'd managed to relax, although doubt still nagged at me.

After that, I'd ended up having a really fun trip.

"That's good to hear. What did you get up to?"

"Oh, it was mostly the ceremony and the banquet. I got to go into town a

little before we left. Oh! And I toured their Magic Research Lab.”

“I see.”

“I brought you a souvenir.”

I stood up and went over to the side table to pick up the little box, which I then offered to Ed.

Ed was gazing at it with confusion. He tried to open it but couldn’t. Frowning, he began turning it over and over in his hands, examining it.

“It’s actually a puzzle box.”

“It is?”

“Yes. You need to follow a specific set of steps to open it. There’s thirty steps in all!”

“Neat...”

Ed’s eyes were sparkling with fascination. It seemed he’d never seen a puzzle box before. Soon he was immersed in fiddling around with it to see how it worked. He was like a little boy with a brand-new toy.

As he turned it over and over in his hands, he spoke again. “I’ll have this open by the time you’re done with your homework.”

“I doubt it. It’s really, really difficult to solve.”

“...What’s inside?”

I wasn’t sure what to say.

It was custom to keep jewelry inside when buying one for personal use. But I’d heard that many people put letters inside before gifting the boxes to friends. I liked that idea, so I put a letter inside as soon as we got back to Najir.

But it would be so embarrassing to have Ed read that letter in front of me. I was pretty confident he wouldn’t be able to solve the box’s puzzle in such a short period of time, though. So I was probably safe. Or so I thought.

“It’s a secret.”

“Now I want to open it up even more.”

Ed grinned with excitement.



As I got on with the homework Ed had set for me, he applied himself to fiddling with the box. Only pausing to answer whatever questions I had on the work I was doing, he focused intensely on his task.

Sliding the wooden panels this way and that, turning the parts that turned.

But I'd bought one of the most complicated versions the artisans' workshop sold, so even Ed seemed to be having a lot of trouble with it.

Every now and then, he would let out a "Hmm!" to himself, eyebrows furrowed. He looked younger than usual when he did that, and I had to hide my smile behind the magical reference book.

I'd been away for several days while in the Sunruta Kingdom, so I had a lot of homework to catch up on.

I made my way through page after page of problems, and just as I finished up and was sighing in relief, the little box opened up with a pop.

"It's open."

"*Huh?*"

I looked over at Ed in surprise to see him pulling my carefully folded letter out of the box.

"Oh! Stop! You have to read that once you get back to your place!"

I reached out to grab the letter, but Ed held it high up, out of my reach. Quickly, he began scanning the pages with his eyes.

I swung for the letter and missed, falling against Ed's broad chest.

Flustered, I quickly pushed myself off of him and tottered back a step, stumbling. With his free hand, Ed caught me by the wrist and stopped me from falling.

"You've written some *very* cute things in this letter..." Ed's eyes softened into a smile, still holding my wrist. Our faces were close.

"I *told* you to read it once you got home..." I pouted.

"You said it too late. I'd already read it by then."

“Liar. You speed-read it AFTER I expressly told you not to!”

I was red in the face, glaring at him. Ed stared at me for a moment, tenderness in his eyes. Then he leaned forward, burying his head in my shoulder and in my hair.

“Ed? What’s wrong?”

I was worried since I couldn’t gauge his expression. And he was leaning against me. He was so warm...

I stayed frozen, unable to move a muscle. Then Ed raised his head, bringing his lips to my ear.

“I felt the same.”

My heart leaped as his hot breath tickled my ear.

I lifted my head, my whole body tingling, and met Ed’s eyes. He was smiling, gazing tenderly down at me.

“Do you mean it?”

Blushing, I gazed up at him.

“It’s been fun in the Sunruta Kingdom, but I miss you. I wish I could see you. I’m always gazing up at the sky, thinking of you.”

That’s what I’d written in my letter.

As soon as I got home, I was so filled with the desire to see Ed that I just wrote down everything I was feeling on paper. I never expected him to read it in front of me, though! I was filled with embarrassment.

“I mean it with all my heart. I often gazed up at the skies and thought of you, Princess. I thought about you meeting with Prince Daniel and all the other young male royals and wondered if you might not lose interest in me. I was quite worried, in truth.”

“Lose interest? In you? *Never.*”

I shook my head, still gazing earnestly into his eyes.

Ed was supremely special to me.

He was the one who'd paid with his life to send me to this new version of our world. Or at least, a version of him had. I loved him so deeply.

"You mean it?"

Now Ed was the one asking *me* that. I blushed, nodding.

"Every word of it."

Ed's face lit up with a blinding smile, as if he were waiting for me to say that.

I closed my eyes as he leaned in and felt the warmth of his lips on mine.

I wished this moment could last forever...

Whenever Ed and I were able to spend time together, I wished it could always last longer than it did. But reality wasn't so kind.

Ed pulled away, meeting my gaze again and chuckling a little as if embarrassed. Straightening up, he helped me back to my seat at the table. Then he picked up my homework and gazed at it, speaking in a bright tone.

"Now then, shall we go over these answers?"

"Yes, please."

I watched Ed as he gazed solemnly at my homework, rubbing my thumb over my lower lip. It was only the briefest of kisses, but his warmth still lingered. I missed the touch of his lips.

Ed explained some of the mistakes I'd made in my homework, and today's lesson started to draw to a close. Just then, Ellie came back with the kettle and tea set.

"Oh dear, I hope I didn't keep you waiting, Princess?" Ellie shut the door behind her, then glanced over the closed textbook on the table, looking apologetic.

"Oh no, we only just finished."

"Oh, splendid. Well, please relax after your lesson. I'll pour tea."

"Thank you, Ellie."

Ellie breathed a sigh of relief and began to serve us tea and cookies.

As the fragrant tea was poured into my cup, the familiar scent reached my nose.

“Is this Dimple tea?”

“Indeed, it is. You received many boxes as gifts.” Ellie paused in her tea pouring, the corners of her mouth lifting in a smile.

Dimple tea...the tea I liked so much from the Sunruta Kingdom. When Daniel came to my room the day before we left, I told him how much I liked the tea, and he’d presented me with many boxes of it as a gift.

The tea had been grown and dried in the Sunruta Royal Tea fields and had a fresh, sophisticated taste, with a heady fragrance.

“This tea is grown in a region of the Sunruta Kingdom known as the Dimple region. That’s why it’s called Dimple tea. It’s really good! One of my favorites!” Biting into one of the cookies, I explained about the tea to Ed.

“I see...” Ed brought the cup to his face and inhaled the scent before taking a sip. Then he smiled. A moment later, he looked at me, as if suddenly recalling something. “Was that another souvenir you bought?”

“What?”

Ed turned to face the side table.

The small white box was sitting on top of it.

“Oh...that was a present from Prince Daniel. To commemorate my first visit to the Sunruta Kingdom.”

I got to my feet and went to retrieve the box, which I placed before Ed. He looked down at the geometric patterns on the lid.

“It looks a lot like the one you gave me. Is this one a puzzle box as well?”

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. I mean, it comes right open.”

I lifted up the lid. It flipped open easily with little effort. The little bag of potpourri inside gave off a sweet, fragrant scent.

“Do you mind if I take a look?” Ed asked.

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

I closed the lid again and passed the little box to Ed. He gazed at it for a few moments, concentrating hard. Then he began to fiddle with it.

“No, no, it moves. This one’s definitely a puzzle box, too.”

“What, seriously?”

I looked on with surprise as Ed began to slide parts of the box around. Before too long, there came a clicking sound.

“It’s open. There’s...a letter inside.”

Ed was right. There was a small space under the main cavity of the box. The potpourri had been resting on a false bottom. Inside, there was a small piece of paper, neatly folded.

“Here.”

Ed handed the piece of paper to me without unfolding it.

I was taken aback. I hadn’t realized the box was another puzzle box. Daniel must’ve been the one who’d hidden the letter inside.

I took it nervously from Ed, opened it up, and began to read. The handwriting on the page looked familiar. It was Daniel’s.

“No one can guess a puzzle box’s contents from the outside. That’s what makes them an enigma. Beware the Witch of the South. I look forward to seeing you again.”

“The Witch of the South?”

I read the words over and over again, totally confused.

I couldn’t tell why Daniel had done this.

Ed immediately noticed something was up from the look on my face. Leaning in, he read the letter as well.

“It seems to be in code. ‘No one can guess a puzzle box’s contents from the outside. That’s what makes them an enigma.’ In other words, you can’t tell

what a thing is from the way it appears, so watch your back? And what's this about a 'Witch of the South...?'"

"I don't know."

I shook my head.

The Witch of the South?

I'd never heard of anyone by that title.

Seriously, I had no idea what Daniel was trying to tell me.

As I stared in silence at the letter, Ed sighed.

"At least it's not a passionate love letter. *That's* a relief."

"Huh?"

I looked up to see Ed gazing at me.

"That parting line, 'I look forward to seeing you again,' troubles me some. But let's just interpret that as politeness on his behalf."

I grinned in response to that.

"What would you have done if it *WAS* a passionate love letter?"

"I would've been most concerned. I would've had to cast a love charm to keep your attention, Princess."

"A *love charm*? No such thing exists."

I giggled. Love charms were just a fairy tale. No magic could truly manipulate the human heart.

Ed smiled softly, leaning in and kissing my forehead. His lips felt hot against my skin. The sensation sent blood rushing to my cheeks.

Ah...it seems I was wrong.

Love magic definitely did exist. And Ed had me under his spell.

I mean, it was obvious.

Look how happy the simplest, sweetest gesture of his could make me...

5. The Coming-of-Age Ceremony

BEFORE the graduation ceremony at Grail Academy, a ball is held. It's meant to be the final practice before the students enter society as adults. In the run-up to the ball, talk turned toward who'd be going with whom and what kind of dresses we'd wear. The female students were all aflutter.

"Bel, have you picked out your dress already?"

As we made our way from the music room to our regular classroom between classes, Oliphia quizzed me on my dress choice.

"Oh, yes. I already ordered it. It's being tailored for me right now at the Laura Adams atelier."

"Laura Adams! Wow, that's so fancy! I can't wait to see it."

Oliphia started spinning around as we walked down the corridor, practicing her dance steps.

Laura Adams was the premier clothing label in Najir and had been for twenty years. It was extremely popular but, being a royal princess, I'd no trouble getting priority when it came to ordering a dress. Members of the aristocracy usually had to go on a six-month waiting list.

"What about you, Phia?" I asked. "Have you made your choice yet?"

"Er, well, mine's not a Laura Adams or anything. It's a Castin Lula. And I didn't actually choose it *myself*..."

Oliphia was being *very* coy indeed. And from the way she was blushing, I had to conclude...

"Is it a present from *Claude*, perchance?"

"Huh?!"

Oliphia's eyes widened in a "How did you know?" kind of way. I couldn't keep myself from giggling.

I'd already heard that Claude was Oliphia's partner for the ball. And in my old timeline, Claude and Oliphia had ended up engaged.

Castin Lula was another well-known Najir clothing label, just like Laura Adams. They tended to use more bows and ribbons in their clothes, and they had a very feminine look. Oliphia would look great in one of their dresses.

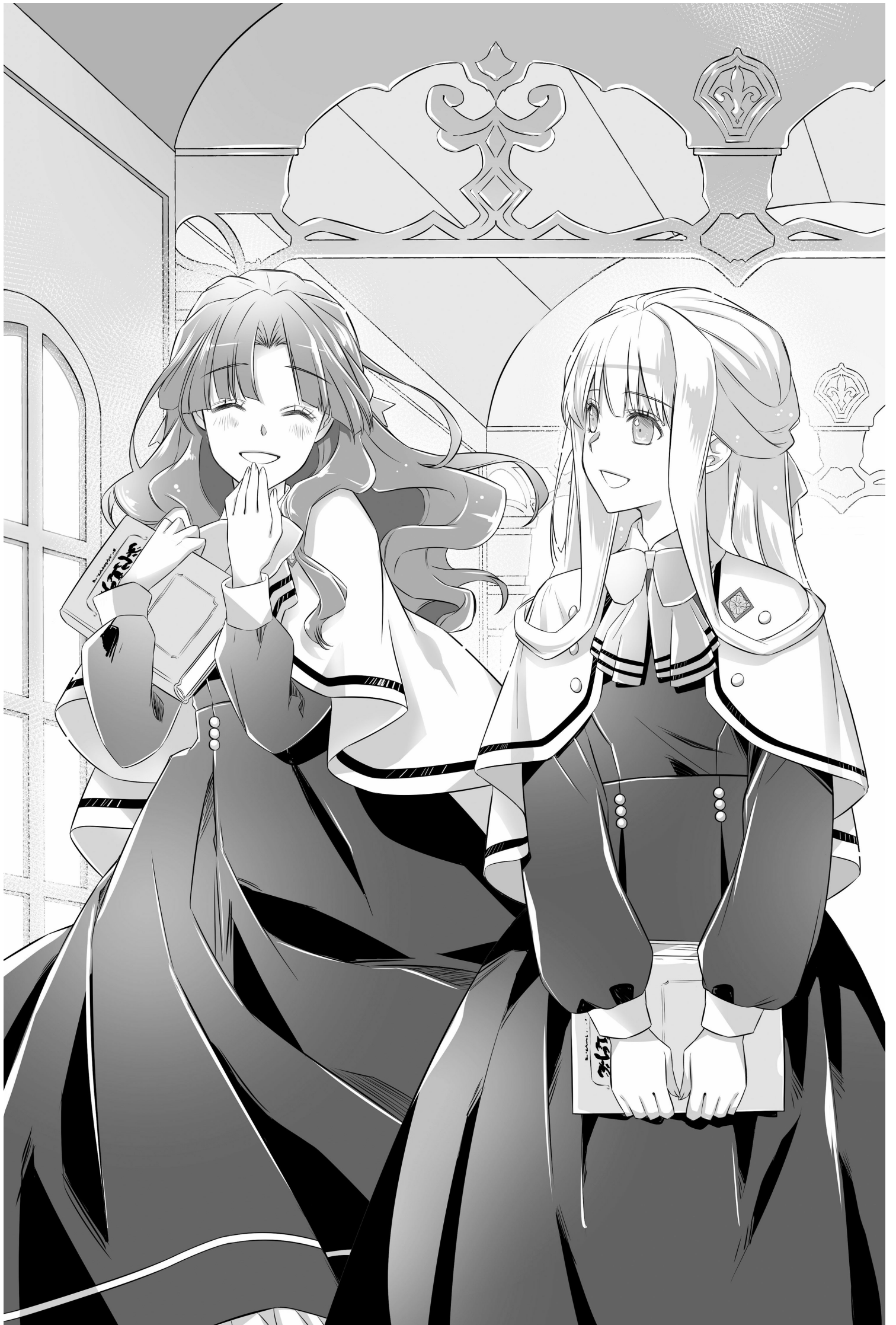
Incidentally, my partner was already decided too. The Captain of the Royal Armed Guard had a second-born son in the year below me, so it was arranged that he would escort me to the ball. Due to his social standing, no one would misconstrue it as anything more, so I'd be able to enjoy the ball while avoiding all sorts of speculation and gossip.

"Actually, I still haven't told you about this, Bel. But...my father and Marquis Judeon have actually been in talks recently..." Oliphia stopped blushing and mumbling and looked me right in the eyes. "We're...we're getting *engaged!*"

Her cheeks were bright pink.

She looked so happy, I couldn't stop smiling. Claude was a lucky fellow to have snapped Oliphia up for himself right before she made her official debut into society.

"Well, I'm not surprised! But congratulations! You'll make a wonderful couple."



“Thank you.” Oliphia nodded bashfully, her smile filling her whole face. “Bel, you must be excited about your coming-of-age ceremony! Princes and princesses will be coming from all over the land, that’s what Claude said. And he said that your future fiancé will probably be one of those princes...”

I felt my smile stiffen as Oliphia looked at me, innocently intrigued by the concept of my future husband.

Claude was the first-born son of the Judeon family, who had long ties to international politics. After graduation, he’d go into government work. He was probably already assisting with the arrangements for my coming-of-age ceremony.

In my old timeline, I’d met Prince Daniel for the first time at my coming-of-age ceremony. We were very quickly engaged after that.

I hadn’t even been aware it was happening. I was worried that engagement plans were being put into place behind the scenes without my knowledge this time, too. In other words, if I didn’t do something drastic, I might find myself engaged to Daniel before I even knew it.

I have to do something...

But what?

I was my country’s only princess. I wasn’t free to choose my own husband.

In this timeline, Ed wanted to marry me. But a commoner marrying a princess...the chances of that were zero in any timeline.

Even if I didn’t end up Daniel’s wife, it was highly likely that I’d be married off to the prince of some other kingdom. And then Ed and I could never be together.

We were physically close enough to fall into each other’s arms at a moment’s notice, yet too far apart in status to ever be able to do so.

I gazed out the hallway windows at the sky. I could see a pair of birds flying high above.

If only Ed and I could forget it all and fly away free into the open sky together... What a blessing it would be if we could. But to really do that, we’d

have to give up everything and live as poor commoners in the countryside somewhere.

I shook my head.

The future I was trying to change...wasn't just *my* future.

It belonged to all the people of Najir. I had to protect them.

So there'd be no running away. Not for me.

If only there was someone I could tell and bring in on what I was trying to do...

If I talked to Ed about it, maybe we could come up with a solution together.

But no...it just isn't feasible.

I couldn't tell Ed that I'd witnessed such a terrible future. Even he wouldn't be able to believe something like that.

But while I was hesitating, time was marching on.

There were only a few months left now until my coming-of-age ceremony, where my fate had been sealed once before.



I could smell a sweet, gentle scent.

The morning was still crisp, but the last of the cold weather was behind us. I always hated waking up from a cozy sleep. But it wasn't so bad with this wonderful fragrance in the air.

I opened my eyes to brightness all around me.

Through the thin material surrounding my four-poster canopy bed, I could see the room filled with flowers.

"Good morning, Ellie," I called out to Ellie, who was bustling busily around my room. At the sound of my voice, she stopped and came over with a smile.

"Good morning, Princess Annabel. And happy birthday! I can hardly believe you're sixteen years old!"

"Thanks, Ellie."

I blushed a little.

Sixteen.

At sixteen, every Najirian comes of age.

“You’ve received so many birthday flowers from everyone.”

Ellie gestured to the flowers on display around the room. The maids must’ve brought in the ones from the Najirian aristocracy while I was sleeping. They were all so beautiful. And there were message cards too.

“Ah...”

I reached for a nearby bouquet’s message card. The La Boulacherie family crest was on it.

“For the Princess, on the occasion of her coming-of-age.

-Edoile Licht La Boulacherie.”

It was nothing more than a polite adherence to social protocol, and it made my heart sink a little. But as I gazed at it, I gasped. The letters grew faint and faded away, to be replaced by a completely different message.

“Happy Birthday. I’ll pay you a birthday visit after school today.

Always, Your Ed.”

It was just one line, but I was thrilled. Only a Royal Magician could come up with such a magical message swap. I was sure that the second line wouldn’t appear if the card envelope was opened by anyone but me.

He’s going to pay me a visit! I wonder how we’ll celebrate...

The letter was enough of a surprise already. But knowing Ed, he must’ve been planning something even more special.

Just imagining the possibilities was so much fun. I couldn’t help smiling to myself.

“You look very happy! What does the message say?”

“What? Oh...just happy birthday. But Ed’s coming by after school.”

“I see. That sounds very nice, Princess.” Ellie smiled at me.



AT the breakfast table, my family made a big fuss about my birthday as well.

From Mother and Father, I got the dress we ordered for my coming-of-age ceremony, plus various fancy accessories. From Charles, I got a stylish hat with feathers. *Even Charles gave me an age-appropriate gift this year!*

Once I arrived at Grail Academy and got down from the carriage, I found myself being greeted by each passing student.

Everyone called out “Happy birthday” to me!

“Good morning, Bel, and happy birthday!”

“Good morning and a very happy birthday to you!”

“Morning, Phia! Morning, Claude! Thank you both!”

As soon as I walked into the classroom, Oliphia and Claude called out to me.

Then Oliphia gave me a small box. I opened it to find a gorgeous, shining silver fountain pen inside. When I looked closer, I could see that it had my name engraved on it.

“I thought you could use it in your official Princess-ly duties, once you’ve come of age!” Oliphia beamed at me.

I smiled back at Oliphia. “Thank you so much,” I said, touched.

Then Claude picked up the wrapped present on his desk and offered it to me.

“Can I open it?”

“Of course.”

I opened it with excitement to see beautiful fabric inside. There was a delicate embroidery design on it, sewn with silk thread.

“Is it a shawl?”

“Yes. It’s from Nigren. My father sent it.”

“Really? Thank you.”

I placed the shawl over my shoulders to see how it looked. It was *very* sheer, almost see-through, which was common of this traditional handcraft from Nigren.

The embroidery work was extensive and covered the whole shawl. It was so beautiful, it took my breath away. Clearly, it'd been embroidered by a true artisan.

"Speaking of which, apparently the Foreign Affairs Minister and the Crown Princess will be attending." As he watched me try on the shawl, Claude suddenly seemed to remember that bit of info.

"What?" I asked.

"To your coming-of-age ceremony, I mean. We've had responses already from many countries. Nigren is sending their Foreign Affairs Minister and their Crown Princess. And several magicians too, for research purposes."

"Oh my! Indeed?" I brightened up.

Nigren's Crown Princess...that was Karina. I really hated her in my old life (*after she'd taken everything from me...*), but I was looking forward to seeing this world's version of Karina again.

I was already starting to feel excited for the chance to chat with her.

I ended up going home from school with lots of birthday presents.

I changed into a casual-but-pretty dress, put on a little makeup, and then paced the room excitedly until finally, a knock came at the door.

I was just fiddling with my bangs in the mirror when the knock came. I quickly dropped the hand mirror in my dresser drawer and pushed it shut.

"Princess Annabel, Master La Boulacherie is here to see you."

"Show him in."

Composing myself, I waited as Ellie opened the door for me. As soon as Ed saw me, he started smiling.

"Happy birthday, Princess."

"Thank you, Ed."

I stood from my seat as Ed looked fondly at me.

"You look very grown-up today."

I looked down at my dress.

I'd actually chosen one of my more mature-looking dresses. After all, I *was* sixteen now. I'd come of age.

While I was at Laura Adams ordering my dresses for the ball and my coming-of-age ceremony, I'd thought "Why not?" and had ordered a few more dresses for everyday wear.

Instead of childish bows and ribbons, I'd chosen dresses with sophisticated embroidery. And instead of puffed skirts, I'd chosen a smoother, draped silhouette.

"I was worried it wouldn't suit me."

"Not at all. It looks wonderful on you." Ed leaned in, bringing his lips to my ear as he gazed around at all the flowers. "You're so beautiful, I thought for a second that perhaps, a flower fairy had appeared."

Indeed, my room was overflowing with so many flowers today that it looked like a garden. That's probably what prompted Ed's comment.

But I blushed anyway, his sweet words filling me with giddy emotion.

Ed gazed at me, gently stroking my cheek.

"Princess, would you care to join me for a stroll?"

"A stroll? Okay."

I'd assumed we'd just have tea or something, so Ed's suggestion surprised me a little. Still, since I'd rushed home today, there was plenty of daylight left. A walk would be nice.

I called Ellie back from her tea-preparing duties to let her know I'd be taking a walk before returning my attention to Ed.

"Hold out your hand, Princess."

"All right."

Ed was holding his hand out to me, as if inviting me to dance.

"It's unusual for *you* to be the one to suggest a stroll, Ed."

Ed and I occasionally took a stroll around the palace gardens together, but it was usually always my suggestion. Ed had never really been the one to initiate it.

“I wanted to make at least one of your wishes come true today, Princess.”

“What do you mean?”

I tilted my head curiously, gazing at Ed as he led me to a thick area of trees where we could be hidden from view. Once concealed, he turned to me with a meaningful smile.

“Please watch, Princess.”

“Hm?”

Watch what? I was confused.

Meanwhile, Ed was muttering an incantation. Immediately, magical particles began to gather around him, reflecting the sunlight with a golden shine.

And then...

“Huh?!”

I was flabbergasted. Right in front of my eyes, Ed had...become someone else.

Soft brown hair rustling in the breeze. And eyes that weren't red but brown.

Ed had gone. Now a pleasant-looking young man stood in his place. A completely different person. At least in appearance.

“That's amazing!” I ended up crying with excitement.

I immediately knew that this was an Illusion. Ed had somehow learned how to cast it on human subjects.

The man who looked nothing like Ed was looking around, checking that no one was watching us. He'd one finger pressed to his lips. I quickly placed my hands over my mouth to stifle any further yelps. Keeping my voice as soft as possible, I leaned in to question Ed.

“Okay, so now you're going to transform *me* into someone else as well, and we can actually go on a date?!”

“That’s what I’d *like* to do, but I haven’t perfected the spell yet. I can only cast it on myself. But I can make a few adjustments on you too, Princess.”

Ed reached out, facing his palm towards me and muttering something.

Golden magical particles began to gather on his palm, giving off a shining light.

Oh!

My hair was a naturally bright, golden blonde. But as the light particles made contact with me, I could see that the hair lying over my shoulders had turned chestnut brown.

“You changed my hair color?” I marveled.

“I changed your hair color *and* your eye color. Of course, I love your natural tones, but these colors also look very nice on you. I’m guessing most people won’t even recognize you as the princess. Now then, would you like to go on that date?”

“I would!” I nodded vigorously. Nothing would please me more.

A date with Ed, without having to worry about who might be watching us... I can’t think of a more spectacular present.

“Well then, let’s get going. Time is short.” Ed pulled a pocket watch from his inner pocket and checked the time.

“But we have until five?” I asked.

I’d checked the clock in my room on our way out. I was certain I wasn’t mistaken. We still had a full two hours.

I blinked up at Ed, who looked down at me apologetically.

“As I said, I haven’t perfected the spell yet. So far, I’ve only been able to make it last for an hour.”

“I see...”

One hour. Spent with Ed, it was sure to pass in an instant.

Ed pulled a charged Magic Crystal from his pocket and put his arm around my waist.

“So, let’s enjoy ourselves to the fullest...for an hour at least. Come on.”

Snuggled into Ed’s warmth, blinking as the world around us blurred and the ground beneath our feet disappeared.

When our feet touched down on solid ground again, I realized we were downtown, where I’d come so many times to shop and have cakes with Oliphia.

“Oh, we’re in town!” I exclaimed with delight.

I looked all around me.

We’d arrived at the town’s main street, where horses and carriages rolled past. From our vantage point at the mouth of a small alleyway, I could see the big crossroads up ahead. Horses clopped past, pulling carriages that creaked and rattled.

“Downtown, to be precise.”

I’d never come to town in disguise before. I was practically beside myself with excitement. Ed chuckled as he took in my sparkling eyes and big grin.

“You’ve been here many times before, haven’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, but never with you!”

“You’re right. But time is ticking. Let’s go.” Ed took my hand and pointed to the main street.

“Hey, Ed?” I tugged Ed’s hand as he started to step forward.

“What’s wrong?”

“When I really think about it...is it really okay for us to be doing this? Leaving the castle without permission...”

Remembering how my last illicit foray into town had affected all the people around me, I suddenly felt anxious. If something bad happened again, I wouldn’t be able to repair the trust I lost.

And it wasn’t only me I had to worry about. Ed would be on the hook, too.

“It’s all right.” Ed nodded, understanding my concerns, but still smiling anyway. “You don’t need to worry about it. I spoke to Charles beforehand.”

“You did?”

“I did. I would never take you away from the palace without letting anyone know. That would be kidnapping. Charles was cool with it. I had to promise to share my transformation magic next time and go on a wild run with him too, though.”

Ed chuckled at the thought.

So Charles knew about things?

How much did he know, in that case?

Just about my excursion with Ed? Or about our relationship?

Worries swirled around my mind, but as I looked at Ed, I began to feel calmer.

“Now that I’ve assuaged your fears, shall we get going?”

“Absolutely.”

Ed started walking again, my hand in his.

Nobody noticed it was us as we strolled through town hand in hand. We probably looked like nothing more than a pair of young aristocrats in love.

Ed’s hand was so big and warm, enveloping mine.

“Hehehe.”

I couldn’t suppress a giggle. I was having so much fun.

Ed looked down at me.

As our eyes met, his narrowed happily. Even with their new brown color, they still seemed so familiar.

Ed led me by the hand right to a certain shop. We paused on the threshold.

“Oh! It’s San Cleart,” I said.

The carved, thick doors, the imposing pillars, the glittering jewels in the shop window... It was San Cleart, the fancy jewelry store I’d stopped by on the day I lost my Magic Stone.

“Since it’s your birthday, we have to start off by buying your present, of course,” Ed said suavely.

The store guard opened the doors for us with an intense stare. Ed headed straight to the floor where the most expensive jewels were sold.

“These are all the most expensive ones, aren’t they?” I asked.

“It’s for your coming-of-age, Princess—I mean, Bel. A Royal Magician’s salary isn’t too shabby, you know.”

Ed had called me “Princess” as he always did and then corrected it to “Bel.” Now he was frowning, as if my concerns about money had caught him off-guard.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. Are you really going to buy me a present here?”

“Of course. That’s why I brought you here.” Ed was smiling softly again.

I headed over to the jewelry cases, my heart beating fast. Ed was chatting with the store staff.

“Is it for a present?” the staff person was saying.

“Yes, it is,” Ed responded.

Red, blue, yellow, green, purple...

So many colorful jewels were on display in neat rows behind the glass.

Which one should I choose?

Just looking at them all glinting and twinkling away made my head swim.

After gazing at the jewels, I raised my head to ask the store clerk a question.

“Excuse me...do you have any hair accessories?”

“Certainly, miss. They’re over here.” The clerk gestured toward a different glass case.

“Are you *sure* it’s a hair accessory that you want?”

Ed was scrutinizing my face as we walked over to the next case. Presumably, he’d expected me to choose a necklace or earrings.

“Yes, I’d love a nice, understated hair accessory. Then I can wear it every day, you see?”

Ed's brown eyes blinked. Then as my words sunk in, his smile grew.

"I see. In that case, please pick whatever you'd like."

"Okay."

Once I came of age, I wouldn't have to wear my school uniform with the tight collars anymore. I'd wear dresses fit for a princess during my official duties. *I should probably choose an accessory that would go well with dresses like that.*

To that end, if I went with a hair accessory, it could be worn on any occasion.

"I like this one."

I'd picked up a simple, elegant hair accessory with a single clear gemstone. There was also another space there where you could have a Magic Stone or gem affixed.

"We'll take this one, please."

"Certainly, sir. This is one of our finest pieces, very simple yet elegant. It can be worn with an assortment of different hairstyles, too."

Smiling, the clerk placed the hair accessory into a jewelry box.

"Hey, Ed. One of the stone spaces is empty. Did you notice?"

"I'd love to put a Magic Stone of my own in there, but shall we put a Magic Crystal in as a placeholder for now?" he asked me.

Publicly wearing someone's Magic Stone was a clear sign of being engaged. Ed certainly wouldn't want that yet. Not when we couldn't make things official.

"I'd like a red crystal, in that case," I declared.

Ed's eyes widened with surprise. Then he squeezed my hand, smiling happily.

I wanted a red crystal the same color as Ed's eyes. And one day, I wanted a real Magic Stone from this world's Ed, too. I'd just have to enjoy the anticipation of that for now, though.

"Whatever you like, Princess."

"I thought it was Bel today?"

"Of course...Bel."

Ed quickly corrected himself. Then we looked each other in the eye and grinned like fools.

After we left San Cleart, we headed straight to a shop that was renowned for selling gorgeous Magic Crystals. Ed bought me the bright, blood-red Magic Crystal I desired.

Then he used his own magical powers to set the Magic Crystal into the space on the hair accessory he'd bought me.

"I added some protective power to it. To always keep you safe."

"You did?"

"Of course. I am *your* knight, after all."

Ed smiled as he clipped the new hair accessory into my hair. I suddenly remembered how Charles had introduced Ed to me for the first time in this world...he'd called him my knight.

"It looks lovely on you," he said, beaming at me.

"Thank you so much!"

"We still have a little time. Is there anywhere else you'd like to go?"

"I'd love to go to a café! I always try to order coffee, but Olthe keeps telling me it's too soon. Well, it's not too soon anymore, right?"

"Olthe? Oh right, the Anglate family's bodyguard."

Ed immediately knew who I was talking about and that Olthe was employed by Olphia's family, the Anglates. I'd often told him about our excursions into town. Now he was chuckling over the image of Olthe trying to keep me away from the dangers of caffeine.

"Then let us go to your choice of café."

Taking my hand, Ed started walking again.

As we sat down at the café, I took my first-ever sip of coffee, and I was shocked at how bitter it tasted. As I screwed up my face in dismay, Ed quickly added sugar and milk to my cup and stirred it for me.

"Try it like this."

I took a tentative sip and was pleasantly surprised to discover that the bitterness had been evened out by the creamy milk and sweet sugar.

“Oh...it’s *really* good!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Ed’s eyes softened as he smiled.



I returned to my room in the palace in high spirits.

Going on a date in town with Ed...it’d been like something from a dream.

And the hair accessory he’d bought me as a present was just what I wanted; elegant but simple. As I gazed at myself in the mirror, I heard someone say my name from behind me.

“Charles!”

I turned to see my brother standing in the doorway. I hadn’t even noticed him, I’d been too busy admiring my reflection.

“You seem like you’re in a good mood. Did you enjoy your excursion?”

“Oh, very much!”

“Good, that’s good. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Huh? Sure.”

I blinked at him.

He must want to talk to me about Ed. A princess going out with an untitled aristocrat...well, it is highly unusual.

But how much did Charles know about our relationship?

Seeing the concern on my face, Charles quickly smiled.

“Bel, to start off...happy sixteenth birthday.”

“Thank you.”

“Sixteen means you’re an adult now. Marriage offers could come at any time. We’ve already had invitations for visits from several royals from countries that

are desperate to see you. After you appeared publicly during our Sunruta Kingdom trip, several of the foreign princes became very taken with you, it seems.”

“.....”

My face stiffened.

Marriage offers?

I knew that as a princess, I was expected to form a political alliance through marriage for my country’s sake.

But all I could picture was the face of my beloved Ed...

I remained silent, not sure what to say. Eventually, Charles broke the silence.

“Bel...do you have feelings for Ed?”

Charles cut straight to the point. I was taken aback and could feel myself blushing. My bashful expression seemed to tell Charles all he needed to know.

“You know, he came to me before your birthday and said something.”

“He did? What did he say?”

Ed didn’t mention anything about that...

I tipped my head to one side and peered at Charles in confusion.

“You know that preparations are underway for your coming-of-age ceremony, right? Well, in the midst of all that, Ed came to my office, all serious, and said that he was going to become a Magic Count and then propose to you. He asked me to block all other incoming marriage propositions for now.”

“*What?!*” I yelped in shock then quickly covered my mouth with my hand.

True, it was only a matter of time until marriage propositions started coming my way. I was of age now, after all. But I was just so shocked that Ed had made his intentions so openly known to Charles.

Charles was smiling. “Boy, was I shocked, Bel!” he exclaimed.

“But did you see that Illusion Ed cast? He’s amazing. That’s a magic technique originally worked on by the great magician Longile. He left detailed records, but

nobody has been able to replicate it in decades. And in just *one* year, Ed succeeds? Even the Head Magician at the research lab calls him a genius!”

Then Charles paused for several moments.

“However, becoming a Magic Count...that’s a different story altogether. You need to invent something incredible that changes daily life for every subject in the kingdom. Only then can you be bestowed with the rank of Magic Count.”

“Ed said he’s working on Magic Sigils that can be used by anyone, even those without any magical power,” I said.

“Yes, I heard about that. But he said he still hasn’t been able to make any progress on them.”

I clenched my fists. Had Charles come here to tell me to forget about Ed and go and get married to some foreign prince?

“Two years.”

“What?”

Two years of what? I frowned, not comprehending.

“I spoke with Father and then told Ed. Youth won’t last forever, you know. He’s got two years to pull it off. After that, all bets are off.”

I blinked rapidly, completely taken aback.

“You’re going to give us a chance, then?”

“We don’t want to lose a magician as fine as Ed. It would harm the kingdom as a whole. Ed knows this.”

“Two years...” I mumbled the words under my breath.

In other words, if Ed *could* manage to become a Magic Count within the next two years, then our marriage would be permitted. If not, I’d be quickly married off to a foreign prince before I became too old to hold any value.

Giving Ed a chance could only benefit the kingdom as a whole.

“You’ve got a deal.” I nodded firmly. Charles smiled at me.

“We’re all wishing for your happiness, Bel. Well, anyway, today is a day for

celebration! Shall we go?"

Charles took my hand and we both got to our feet.

"Roast beef's on the menu, Bel. Your favorite."

"Really? Yay!"

Grinning, I replayed my conversation with Charles in my mind.

Two years...

That was both a long time and like no time at all.

But I had the feeling that if anyone could pull this off, it would be Ed.



AND so, I graduated from Grail Academy and my school days were over.

During the mornings, I received instruction in various spheres of learning from personal tutors. During the afternoons, I began performing official royal duties, including touring welfare institutions. I became very busy indeed.

Then one day, three days before my coming-of-age ceremony was due to be held...

Claude had come that day to teach me more about international politics. And he happened to mention that Karina would be arriving today from Nigren.

"Really? *Today?*"

"Yeah. Well, she's *due* to arrive today. She was supposed to be here this morning, but she's not arrived yet. Maybe she's held up on the road somewhere."

Claude was also hard at work in his new role as a diplomat. His first big career event was my coming-of-age ceremony.

Claude got up from the table and went over to the window. He stared down at the castle gates. Then, presumably seeing no sign of royal carriages, he shook his head and shrugged.

"Are the Nigren delegation our first guests?"

"Supposed to be. Most of the other countries' visitors will arrive tomorrow.

We're going to have them settle in and relax today and tomorrow. Then we're going to take them on a tour of the Magical Research Lab in three days."

"Hmm."

Our country of Najir was the most magically powerful in the world.

As such, our research lab was the world's finest. Obviously, the foreign delegates would be fascinated to see it. Also, it'd be an excellent opportunity for us to show off some of our magical spells. They *were* the best in the world after all.

"After celebrating your coming-of-age ceremony, the delegates will spend another day or two in Najir relaxing before returning home."

"That sounds like how things went when I visited the Sunruta Kingdom."

"Yeah. Some countries like to do some sightseeing on the way home since they came all this way. And some countries use these occasions to have talks with each other."

"That makes sense."

Claude had a way of describing international politics in such a casual, chatty way. It was really fun listening to him. Sometimes Oliphia came along with him, and the three of us would have tea. I always enjoyed those times. It was so different from how things were around this time during my last life.

Today, in preparation for the ceremony, Claude was teaching me about the various countries that would be visiting. He also informed me about the babies that'd recently been born in each royal family and about their traditional foods, crafts, festivals, and so on. Basically, a general rundown of each country and its culture.

It'd be obvious that I had done my homework when it came time for me to converse with our foreign guests. At least, that was the intention behind today's lesson.

If I could drop some knowledge during conversations with the visiting elite, it would show that Najir was paying close attention to their country and cared about their affairs. In other words, I would make a good first impression.

After a class filled with a ton of information to memorize, then lunch, I went back over my notes. I wanted everything to be perfect. If I reeled off an incorrect fact, that'd spoil everything and tarnish Najir's reputation.

I must've been studying alone for hours.

All at once, I was distracted by a sweet scent. I lifted my head to see Ellie putting the tea set down on the side table. She'd brought tea and walnut cookies.

"Don't study too hard, Princess. You'll wear yourself out. Please, take a break."

"Okay. Thank you, Ellie."

I smiled and picked up my teacup.

The subtle flavors pleased my palate and the warm tea soothed my exhaustion.

When I gazed out the window, I could see a clear blue sky. The cold air had warmed up recently, and it was a new, bright day. Just perfect for taking a walk in the gardens.

Hmm, maybe I'll go see Ed...?

Ed came once a week to give me my magic lesson. Aside from that, we communicated via letters. But we hadn't been on another date, or a date-like meeting, since my birthday. I *really* fancied a walk around the gardens with him.

I picked up my notepad and scribbled a message. "I'll be walking in the gardens. Would love it if you could join me." Then I stared down at what I wrote, focusing all my concentration on the sheet of paper. Using the little bit of transference magic I'd been able to master, I made the letter disappear.

If my spell worked, then Ed should've received the letter instantly.

I headed over to the mirror to check that my hair and clothes looked okay. Then I put on the feather hat Charles had given me for my birthday and headed down to the garden.

There was a little gazebo located in front of the fountain in the plaza. Ellie and I made our way across the spacious gardens and sat there. Soon, a tall man

dressed in a black cape emerged from the Magical Research Lab and headed across the lawn.

“Ed!” I waved at him. Realizing it was me, Ed smiled and changed direction to join us.

“Out for a walk, Princess?”

“Indeed. And you, Ed? On a break?”

“Yes. I thought a stroll around the gardens might be a nice change of pace. Would you care to walk with me?” Ed offered me his hand. We were both keeping up the pretense of this being a chance meeting.

“Yes, please. How long do you have for your break?”

“Around fifteen minutes. I *do* have a lot of work on my plate.”

“Very well. Ellie, do you mind if I walk with Ed?”

I turned to Ellie. Ellie nodded.

“Very well, Princess,” she said. “I shall wait here.”

I took Ed’s hand and we started slowly strolling through the gardens.

“Sorry, perhaps I shouldn’t have bothered you while you’ve got so much work...”

I was worried that I was distracting Ed from his important work. I peered up at his face in concern, but he shook his head, smiling at me.

“Worry not. I was due a break, anyway. This was the perfect opportunity. This way, I get to see your beautiful face.” Ed lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. “The sight of your smile always makes my exhaustion evaporate.”

My hand felt hot where his lips touched it.

“So...you’re very busy right now?” I tried to shift the conversation to more businesslike things, aware of my bright-red cheeks.

“Yes, it’s almost your coming-of-age ceremony, after all. We’re going to show the foreign dignitaries around the Magical Research Laboratory, and I’m going to demonstrate some of our magical techniques. If I screw up, it’ll tarnish Najir’s reputation, so I’m making sure I’ve got it all down pat. We’re going to have a

practice run-through this afternoon, actually.”

Ed sighed a little as I craned my neck to look up at him.

During this morning’s session with Claude, he’d mentioned that a bunch of foreign emissaries would be coming to tour the Magical Research Laboratory the day after tomorrow. Everyone was surely very busy right now preparing for their visit.

But I was sort of glad to hear it.

After all, if Ed was going to be demonstrating magic and representing the might of the Najir Magical Research Laboratory, that must mean he was very highly regarded in his field. One of the world’s very best.

“You’re going to be demonstrating the spells? That’s amazing!”

“Yes. Remember the Illusion I showed you before? The Head of Research asked me to demonstrate that one for the foreign visitors.”

“Oh, wow! Yes, that one is seriously impressive. No one’s been able to do that in centuries, after all! Oh yes, your name is going to go down in the magical history books for sure, Ed!”

“Haha! Well, thank you.” Ed chuckled. Then he reached out to touch my hair. “You’re always wearing my gift whenever I see you.”

“Of course. It’s my special, precious gift from you, Ed.”

I reached up to touch my own hair, feeling the hard, delicate metalwork there. I made sure to wear them every day...the Magic Stone I’d received from the old world’s Ed and the hair accessory I had gotten from this world’s Ed for my birthday.

Ed smiled, then, seeing that we’d reached the flower bushes, he leaned down and picked a single scarlet flower which he then placed into my hair. It was the same red as the crystal he had gifted me.

“That looks nice on you.”

“Thank you...”

I looked down, his gaze somehow too intense for me to bear.

Then we heard the sound of people approaching.

We were in the castle grounds, so I knew it couldn't be anyone nefarious. But who'd be moving about in such a big group? I turned toward the sound. Ed, also having noticed, turned too.

"Who is it?"

From the sound of the voice, its owner was a young woman. Probably some young royal had come to pay a visit to the royal family. The voice was growing louder as they came closer. They sounded very cheerful.

Then, as the group passed under the archway of trees, we could see them. My eyes opened wide in recognition.

"Oh? Princess Karina?"

It was the Nigren Princess, who I'd last seen several months before...Karina!

Karina seemed to have been unaware that I was out here. At the sound of my voice, her eyes widened.

"Oh my! Princess Annabel!" Beaming, she hurried over to me. "Oh yay! I wasn't expecting to see you so soon! I'm so glad we decided on a stroll after unpacking."

"You just arrived?" I asked, smiling in kind.



“Oh, yes! Just moments ago, in fact!”

Karina gestured to the palace’s west wing, where the visitors’ quarters were located.

I turned my gaze to Karina’s entourage. There were two young women who seemed to be ladies’ maids, a knight for protection, and another young woman about our age, who was wearing a deep blue cape.

They’d clearly all come along to accompany Karina on her trip from Nigren to Najir.

“Princess, who is this?”

Ed’s voice was filled with concern and I jumped a little. *Oh, right.* Ed and Karina hadn’t met yet.

“This is Princess Karina, the first-born princess of Nigren. Princess Karina, this is my magic teacher, the Magical Researcher Edoile Licht La Boulacherie. He’s one of my brother Charles’s oldest friends.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord La Boulacherie. I am Karina Niquist of Nigren.” Karina smiled at Ed.

Ed took Karina’s proffered hand and kissed the back of it.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Welcome to our country, Princess Karina. I am Edoile Licht La Boulacherie, one of the Magical Researchers here. I will be your tour guide, of sorts, when you visit the Magical Research Laboratory the day after tomorrow.”

“A Magical Researcher? Wow, if you’re an official Royal Magician of Najir, you must *really* know your stuff! I’m really excited to see the Magical Research Laboratory. *Ah*, but what perfect timing! Here we have Nigren’s finest magician! Please, share your magical knowledge with her if it pleases you! This is Elena.”

“I’d be happy to impart whatever knowledge I can.”

Ed turned to the other young woman, Elena, in her dark blue cape.

Elena looked back at him with eyes as black as her hair, which was pulled back into a single braid.

“What field of magic do you specialize in, Elena?”

“...I dunno. I can do most stuff,” Elena muttered in a barely audible voice. Her face barely even moved as she spoke. She seemed very standoffish.

“I see.” Ed smiled wryly. “All right then, how about if I show everyone some unusual magic?”

Ed raised both hands, concentrating hard, and began to chant.

The golden particles began to swarm around him as he cast his spell. Elena and company simply stared, taken aback.

The next moment, the particles cleared, and one of the daisies that bloomed in the garden appeared, nestled on his palm. He’d used magical transference to bring one of the daisies from clear across the garden.

“Oh my, how amazing!”

Karina and her maids gasped and clapped. Clearly, they’d never seen Transference at work before. They all seemed shocked and delighted.

“Here, as a welcome gift.” Smiling, Ed offered the daisy to Elena.

Conflicted, Elena simply stared at it.

“I noticed you looking at those flowers as you walked in. Are they your favorites?” Ed tilted his head and looked kindly down at Elena.

“...Thanks...”

After a moment of tense silence, Elena reached out and tentatively took the daisy. Then she brought it to her nose and inhaled deeply.

She likes daisies? I wondered as I watched Elena enjoy the flower.



TODAY was finally the day of my coming-of-age ceremony.

I was wearing a white dress like a bride, only it had fine gold embroidery all over it. Every time I moved, the skirts swayed, and the gold thread glinted in the light. The skirts clung tight to my lower body, and the bodice’s flower lacework was delicate. A red flower was in the center of the neckline, adding a single pop of color.

I reached up to feel the cool, heavy item around my neck. It was a necklace studded with diamonds, very royal.

“Here, Princess Annabel.”

“Thank you.”

Ellie held out my tiara, which was studded with the same kind of diamonds as the necklace. I lowered my head slightly, and then I could feel the heavy weight of the tiara on my head.

“You are truly beautiful, princess. The pride of Najir.”

“*Hehe*, you’re flattering me. But thank you, Ellie.”

“It’s the truth. I imagine many men will fall in love with you today!”

Ellie scrutinized my hair to make sure that every strand was in place. Then she smiled at me. I smiled right back at her.

Today was my coming-of-age ceremony as the first and only princess of the land of Najir. The great hall was already filled with guests, and the atmosphere was very joyful. If I listened closely, I could hear the musicians playing downstairs.

“Bel, are you ready to go?”

Charles appeared at my door with a knock.

Now that Charles was seventeen, he’d grown much taller and looked very princely indeed. In his white frock coat, he looked every inch the crown prince. I nodded. “I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go. Everyone is in the great hall, waiting to celebrate with you.”

Charles took off his gloves and held his hand out to me. Taking my hand, he smiled warmly at me. “You look adorable. I’m proud to call you my sister.”

“How many people are in the great hall?”

“Including the foreign guests and the domestic aristocracy, we’ve got about five hundred in attendance.”

“That *many*?”

I remembered a lot of people attending my coming-of-age ceremony in the last timeline, too. I had been so nervous that I couldn't do anything except stare at my feet. Then Daniel had asked for my first dance. Things would be different this time.

As they saw us approaching, the knights on guard by the great hall doors dropped to their knees, lowering their heads. Then they rose and slowly pulled open the doors for us.

"Presenting Prince Charles and Princess Annabel!"

The officary announced us. And then thunderous applause rang out. Charles escorted me right over to the king and queen—our father and mother. Seeing me resplendent in my white dress, they both broke into huge smiles.

After greeting our parents, I was besieged by guests who wanted to talk to me. I'd met some of them in the Sunruta Kingdom, and some I even remembered from my old timeline. But there were many more who I'd never seen before. Then, all of a sudden, a familiar face emerged from the crowd.

"Congratulations on your coming-of-age, Princess Annabel."

"Thank you."

It was Sunruta's Prince Daniel, offering me his hand and gazing at me with his icy-blue eyes. I hadn't seen him since his coronation ceremony.

"I am pleased to see you looking so well. You've bloomed like a rose in the garden. In just a few short months, your beauty has only grown."

"Well...thank you very much."

Was this what the world of high society was really like?

I had the feeling it was normal for men to praise the beauty of women with sophisticated metaphors, but it'd been years since I'd experienced it in my old world, and it made me blush terribly. Daniel narrowed his eyes in pleasure as he took in my reaction.

"I would like to request the honor of your first dance."

I blinked back at Daniel.

“May I have the honor of partnering with you for your first dance?”

The phrasing was different, but I suddenly recalled how Daniel had asked me the exact same thing on our first meeting in the old timeline.

I hesitated.

This was how we became acquainted in the old world. Then Daniel had gone on to ask me to marry him. But this time, I had Ed, who’d already made his intentions known to my father and brother. So, Daniel couldn’t propose this time. There was no need for me to be so nervous.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Daniel smiled widely, pleased with my answer.



AFTER my first dance with Daniel, we headed into a corner of the ballroom for a rest. Then a young woman came hurrying over to join us.

“Princess Annabel, Prince Daniel!”

“Ah, Princess Karina.”

Karina was wearing a light pink, very cute dress. Her hair was like red fire as it fell down her back. She looked very pretty indeed.

“Congratulations on your coming-of-age, Princess Annabel! I’m so sorry I was so late in greeting you.”

“Thank you.” I smiled back at her.

The introductions and greetings earlier had taken what felt like years. I was glad Karina had held back until now, when we could have a proper conversation.

“Are you enjoying Najir?” I asked.

“Oh yes, very much! And I got to see the Magical Research Lab yesterday. It was filled with such *extraordinary* magic! It was quite amazing! Wasn’t it, Prince Daniel?” Karina shifted her gaze to Daniel.

“Yes, all the magic that was demonstrated was most impressive.”

“But the most impactful was the demonstration by your magic teacher, Princess Annabel. You know, he can change his appearance at will! I couldn’t believe my eyes!” According to Karina’s breathless report, Ed’s magical demonstration had gone perfectly.

I was happy to learn that Ed’s Illusion demonstration had been a hit.

“Indeed, Mr. La Boulacherie is one of Najir’s finest magicians. He’s still the only one in the land who can conjure an Illusion.”

“Oh, yes. But if everyone could do it, what a shock that would be! Elena was fascinated, too!” Karina nodded vigorously.

“Ah, that reminds me, Princess Karina,” I said. “Do you have any plans tomorrow or the day after?”

“Erm...I think we’re just going to be doing some sightseeing in town one of those days. The other one, I’m completely free, though!”

“In that case, I’d like to ask you to join me for a full day. Where should we go...? Oh, there’s a splendid scenic spot about an hour’s ride away... What do you think?”

“You’re going to show me around, Princess Annabel? Oh, yay! Incidentally, I’m an expert horseback rider!” Karina clasped her hands together in front of her chest and did a little hop.

After a bit more chit-chat, Karina was asked to dance, and away she went. Then Daniel asked me if I’d like to go out onto the terrace. I figured there’d be nothing to worry about as long as we were on the palace grounds, so I agreed to step outside with him.

A fresh breeze was blowing, setting the leaves in the trees dancing. The weather had gotten warm lately, so it was very pleasant out.

Daniel leaned his elbows against the terrace balustrade and gazed out across the gardens, which were illuminated by lanterns. I went to stand beside him, gazing out at the moonlit gardens, which looked most ethereal.

“Speaking of the Magical Research Lab that Karina mentioned...it really *was* most impressive. Our country is doing its best, but we can’t even hold a candle

to Najir. I asked your researchers to conduct an educational lecture for the magicians we brought with us. They should be hard at work taking notes on that right now.”

“Oh, I see.”

My eyes widened. This was news to me.

According to Daniel, these magicians from his homeland had accompanied him on the Magical Research Laboratory tour the other day. When they’d seen just how advanced our facility was, they’d yearned to improve themselves. One of our Magical Researchers had agreed to conduct a private lecture for our magician guests.

“Who is the lecturer?”

“Ah, what was his name again? The fellow with black hair, red eyes...”

“Mr. La Boulacherie. He’s my personal magic tutor.”

I knew it was Ed from the description. Ed’s hair and eye color combination were extremely rare.

A lot of people didn’t like that hair and eye color, but I thought they suited Ed’s strong, serious persona perfectly. I loved them.

“And Mr. La Boulacherie, he’s...”

“Yes?”

“...Ah. Never mind.” Daniel clammed up, shaking his head. Then he heaved a huge sigh. “I intend to do whatever I can to bring my country to prosperity. But a lot of things have come up, and things haven’t gone the way I planned them to at all. Sometimes I feel so lost...I just don’t know what the right thing to do is...”

Daniel was talking to me, but it seemed almost like he was talking to himself, lost in his own thoughts. I watched him as he stared out at the moonlit gardens, not even seeing them.

“Has something happened? Something you didn’t predict?” I asked, feeling like there was more to this conversation.

“So many things. Nothing has turned out the way I wanted it to.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Hmm... Well. I never expected you two princesses to go off riding together. I hadn’t imagined either of you could ride at all. I was hoping to invite you to ride double with me while we went in search of wildflowers. But now I’ve completely lost that chance.”

Daniel shrugged.

“Oh, *hehe*.”

You two princesses...he means Karina and me. So he was surprised to learn that we were both competent riders. Is there more of a reason why he would think that way?

Daniel chuckled a little before continuing. “There’s more, too. I came here to Najir hoping to form an alliance through the proposition of marriage. But Najir apparently is not eager to give up its most precious jewel just yet.”

I blinked rapidly.

So Daniel *had* come here with a mind to propose to me after all. But when he spoke to my father about it, he was turned down.

Yes...in the old timeline, my coming-of-age ceremony was when Daniel had asked for my hand.

“So—”

“A lot of other things happened too. But that’s the one that stands out the most. Well, I plan to try again...in two years.”

Daniel smiled at me in the gloom. He was trying to make a joke of it, so I didn’t feel guilty.

I smiled back at him.

In the old world, Daniel was always so kind. I still don’t know what had caused him to go through that monstrous change. But I *know that when I first met Daniel, he was as sweet as tonight*.

“I wish for the prosperity of Najir too. You and I are the same in that regard.”

“I see. Then let us both do our best to serve our countries.”

“Yes, let’s.”

The doors opened behind us, and someone else walked out onto the terrace to take in the night air. Daniel turned to face the ballroom once more.

“We should probably return. The guest of honor can’t really desert her guests, now, can she?”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“May I have the honor of another dance, Princess?” Smiling, Daniel offered me his hand.

“Of course.”

I took his hand with a smile, and we returned to the ballroom to enjoy my coming-of-age party.

The ballroom doors closed behind us, and the noise and bustle of the party were swallowed by the deep, dark night.



THE day after the ball, I invited Karina, Daniel, and other royal guests horseback riding. The weather was fine, with blue skies ahead as we rode off to a spot where there was a medium-high hill, from which we could look out over the land.

“Now, south is that way. I wonder if we can see any of Nigren?” Karina shielded her eyes with her hand as she gazed into the distance, squinting. “Er, nope! Can’t see it. All I can see is that mountain range. Look over there.”

“Oh yes. The Barlay Mountains.”

The Barlay Mountains marked the borders between Najir, the Sunruta Kingdom, and Nigren. Daniel and Karina were chatting away animatedly, discussing the topography.

On the way home, I took everyone by the Magic Crystal shop preferred by the royal family, per their request. Since Najir is replete with magic, our Magic Crystals are greatly sought-after in foreign countries.

“Hey, Princess Annabel, is that crystal you’re wearing one of the ones from this shop?”

After perusing the crystals on display in the shop, Karina came over to me and pointed at the red stone on my necklace. In other words, the Magic Stone the old world’s Ed had given to me.

“Uh, this...this isn’t a Magic Crystal. *This* is a Magic Crystal.” I pointed to the red gem I wore in my hair. The one Ed had bought me to adorn my hair accessory. “It’s got protective powers. Like that protective spell Daniel had demonstrated for us in his country’s research lab, remember?”

“Ooh, a protective charm...” Karina leaned in, gazing at the stone in my hair with fascination.

“Why don’t you get a similar one made?” I suggest. “It will be my gift to you.”

“What, really? I’d love that!”

Karina’s face lit up and her eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled.

A Magic Crystal with protective powers would be a rare item in her almost magicless country.

Maybe I should have Ed make one for her...

I could make one myself, of course, but a professional magician like Ed could make one that was so much better. As soon as we got back to the palace, I’d ask him.

“Then let’s choose a stone.”

“Ooh, which one should I choose?”

Eyes sparkling, Karina gazed at the glass cases filled with glittering crystals. I smiled, pleased that I could give her something wonderful to commemorate her visit to my country.

6. The Case of the Vanishing Classified Books

BACK at the palace, I took the crystal Karina chose with me as I went in search of Ed.

However, when I arrived at the Magical Research Lab, something was odd. The magicians and the palace guards were all standing in a group. They were all gesticulating wildly, talking about something. And right in the middle of the group was Ed, looking concerned.

“Charles? What’s going on? Is Ed all right?”

I spotted Charles amongst the group and went over to talk to him. Charles was frowning and looked surprised as his eyes focused on me.

“Bel? What are you doing here?”

“Princess Karina wants a protective Magic Crystal made, so I came to ask Ed.”

I held up the bright yellow Magic Crystal to show Charles. It was attached to a golden chain for easy wearing.

“Ed’s a bit busy right now, though, huh? What’s all the commotion?”

Ed seemed to be explaining something to a knight and a palace guard as they all stood by the entrance to the Magical Research Lab. I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on, but it almost looked like they were interrogating him.

Charles looked in their direction, his jaw stiff, his eyes serious.

“They’re looking for something.”

“What? Why can’t they just use Locating magic to find it?”

“There’s no response to the spells.”

“No response? Whatever are they looking for?”

“Classified magic books. They were present at the evening check, yesterday evening. But between then and the next check an hour later, they vanished.

Ed's the only one said to have visited the palace library's Classified Books Room during that hour. But Ed doesn't know anything, either."

"You mean..."

The words stuck in my throat.

The classified magic books contained research notes on various forms of magic not shared with the general public. The research was very advanced. For a country like Najir, renowned for its magic, the books represented top government secrets. They were incredibly important.

Ed was a Royal Magician. So, of course, he had the right to freely access the Classified Books Room. But the rules said that the books could never be taken out of that room for fear that their contents might be leaked to foreign nations.

"Maybe he just made a mistake and put them back on the wrong bookshelf after reading? Ed would *never* take a Classified Book out of the library, after all."

"That's what the guards thought, too. They've been searching all over for them, but there's no sign. I got the report, and then Ed was brought in for questioning, too."

"What did Ed say?"

"He said he never even visited the Palace Library last night."

"What? So then, it must be a case of mistaken identity."

"No, that's not possible."

Charles shook his head.

He sounded like he didn't want to believe it either, but apparently, there was irrefutable evidence.

"The palace guard on duty outside the library saw him clearly. And he knows Ed, so he *knows* it was him. In fact, several guards on duty that night saw and confirmed that it was Ed."

"I see..."

I frowned.

Certainly, any guards on duty near the library would know Ed by sight. And if

several guards were saying the same thing, then it was hard to believe they were all mistaken.

Why would Ed tell such a blatant lie?

Just then, I remembered what Daniel had told me last night at the ball.

“Oh, yeah...”

Daniel said he’d asked Ed to give his countrymen some magic lecture. It was supposed to be happening while the ball was on. I told Charles about that, and Charles said he’d confirm it as soon as possible.

Later, I accompanied a very bewildered Ed and Charles to Daniel’s room.

Daniel seemed annoyed by the sudden intrusion but smiled at us anyway.

He seemed to have already started packing for his return home the day after tomorrow. Through what we could see of the room behind him through the half-open door, it was strewn with belongings.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Yesterday evening, this Royal Magician was with some of your magicians visiting from the Sunruta Kingdom, or so I hear. Can you confirm that?” Charles gestured toward Ed as he spoke.

Daniel listened to Charles’s frank request in silence. Then he turned and called back into the room. Immediately, two young men appeared from within.

They both wore magicians’ robes like Ed. One was short with black hair, and the other was very thin and had tied-back chestnut hair.

“Yesterday evening? Yes, we were together. What about it?”

The shorter man looked at Charles and Ed in concern. Then he looked at Daniel.

“Could you tell us what time that was? If you could remember the exact hour?” Daniel prompted.

“Uh...it was about thirty minutes after you left for the ball. We were there for about three hours. We ate dinner while the speaker talked us through the lecture.”

Charles pressed the man further. “Did anyone leave their seat during the lecture?”

“No, not even once.”

The short man looked to his companion to corroborate. The chestnut-haired man backed him up with a nod.

“.....”

Charles fell silent.

We didn’t know the exact time when Ed was allegedly spotted, but it seemed clear that it’d been during the time when he was delivering his magic lecture to this pair.

“If I may ask, what magical techniques did the lecture discuss?” Charles narrowed his eyes on the two magicians.

“Oh, various ones. A little Levitation, some Transference, Magic Sigils, and so on. And he showed us his Illusion again. That one, now that’s very impressive.” The chestnut-haired man spoke this time, a little breathlessly.

It all lined up with what Ed had told Charles on the walk over here. In other words, there was no doubt that Ed had been busy instructing these magicians last night.

What on earth is going on?

I was honestly confused. How could one person have been seen in two different places at the same time?

“Has something happened?”

Daniel looked around at us, picking up on the tense vibe.

Finally, he rubbed his chin with his hand and spoke.

“The same person, the same time, two different places... Prince Charles. You should search the luggage of every visitor in the palace. Each and every one. Of course, I give you full permission to check the luggage of every Sunruta visitor, too.”

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary...”

Rifling through guests' private possessions would be construed as blaming them for theft. Charles shook his head at the idea. He'd relations between Najir and her neighbors to consider after all.

"You can say that there've been rare, clothes-eating moths spotted in the palace, and you need to check everyone's belongings for signs of damage. Or make up another excuse like that. It's better to act fast before it's too late."

"Ah... I suppose you're right."

Charles nodded, taking in Daniel's solemn expression. Ed and I just looked at one another.



SPURRED into action by Daniel, Charles got to work immediately. He mobilized Ed, the magicians, and me to quietly search while he paid impromptu "Farewell" visits to the rooms of every guest who had come to attend my coming-of-age ceremony.

The tale about clothes-eating moths would probably only panic our guests, so that was out. Nor could we force them to open up their luggage for us.

But as long as we could access their rooms, our magicians could quietly use Locating magic to search the luggage's contents without having to open them.

Meanwhile, the guests were charmed by Charles's "Farewell" visits. Many invited him to stay and have tea with them. It was no trouble at all to gain access to their rooms.

We'd made it through about half of the guests' rooms when we next stepped into the corridor and noticed a change had taken place. One of the guards usually assigned to the library was running this way, clearly out of breath.

"Your Highness, we've located the Classified Books."

"You have? Where?" Charles immediately questioned the breathless guard.

"They were... They were on the bookshelf. In the library."

"What?!"

Charles frowned, raising his voice in disbelief.

An extensive search had been conducted. The books had absolutely *not* been in the library. That was why all the fuss had happened in the first place. Why Charles had been alerted. Why Ed had been interrogated. Why we'd gone to Daniel for confirmation as to Ed's whereabouts last night.

And now they were saying they'd found them right where they ought to have been?

"Explain yourself. Did you check to make sure no one else went in or out?!"

"Of course, Your Highness..." The guard's face was somber. "No one went in or out."

"Nobody?"

"Not a soul."

"...What is the meaning of all this...?"

Charles couldn't hide his confusion.

Nor could I.

This sequence of events was so strange. What could possibly have been going on?

Ed had been silent, listening soberly to the guard. But now he spoke.

"There are two possibilities. The first is that the guards overlooked the books in the library and mistakenly assumed they were missing. The other is that whoever had the books in their possession managed to return them without entering through the library's doors—by using Transference magic or the like. Only the library is protected by an anti-magic shield to prevent laypersons from accessing the off-limits books. Only a very skilled magician indeed would be able to bypass the shield. It would be possible, though. A Royal Magician could do it. I know / could."

"But who would do something like that, and why? A Royal Magician would have free access to the Classified Books, anyway. He could just enter through the doors like normal. And what about the guards who say they saw you around the library last night?"

"Well...perhaps the guards are lying. Or perhaps someone who looked a lot

like me was there.”

If the guards were lying, that would explain away everything.

But why would the guards lie and cause such a commotion, even getting the prince involved? The punishment for deceiving the royal family was life imprisonment. It was considered treason. Not to mention, accusing a duke’s son like Ed of theft was also an extremely serious offense.

It was also hard to believe that they’d simply seen someone who looked just like Ed.

Ed’s midnight-black hair and blood-red eyes were very unusual. I’d personally never seen anyone with the same hair and eye color combination.

It was very rare and not very popular with people. Ed had a complex about his red eyes as a kid and used to hide them behind his hair.

If anyone had been confused as to someone’s identity, it would’ve been Daniel’s magicians. Perhaps another Royal Magician had been their tutor that evening? Ah, but no. They clearly said that the tutor had shown them his “Illusion” technique. And only Ed possessed such knowledge.

Charles pressed the guard further. “This doesn’t make sense,” he said. “Did you check to make sure those were the real missing books?”

“The Head of the Magical Research Lab just confirmed it.” The guard hurried to answer Charles’s question.

“Then make sure they are secured on their shelves. And tell the Head to cast another, stronger shield around the entire library. I can’t very well only say goodbye to half the guests, so I’ll have to continue my rounds. After that, I’ll head to the lab myself and make sure everything’s in order.”

Upon receiving Charles’s instruction, the guard saluted and hurried away. Charles watched him go before turning to Ed.

“Ed, if the contents of those books were read, that means all of our magical secrets could be leaked to foreign parties, doesn’t it?”

Ed hesitated for a moment before answering.

“Your average magician wouldn’t be able to make any sense of what they

read, though. So, it wouldn't matter. But if they were on par with a Royal Magician in terms of knowledge and skill, they *might* be able to comprehend the magical theories recorded in the books and apply what they learned. In other words, it depends on the reader. But as I said before, if the culprit could break through the library's magical shield and Transfer the books, they would have to be a very advanced magician indeed. Advanced enough to comprehend the contents of those books."

"I thought as much. And what do you think about you being in two places at the same time?"

"As to *that*, I have no theories. I could do it, of course, using my Illusion. But so far, I'm the only one in the world who has mastered that technique. Not that I'd completely discard the possibility that someone else could do it, too."

"I see. So it seems we're in the dark about many things."

Charles gritted his teeth.

It was a relief that the Classified Books had been found safe. But this incident was far from over.

It was entirely possible that our country's magical secrets had already leaked and were in the hands of foreign entities. And we had no idea who. It was a terrible situation for Najir.

After that, Charles launched a full-scale investigation into the incident. But there were no leads.

7. First Stirrings of Trouble

ONE day, about six months after my coming-of-age ceremony...

After finishing my morning royal duties, I returned to my room to find several letters on my desk. *My mail for today.*

I opened them one by one.

There were invitations to balls and banquets from aristocrats throughout Najir. Letters from the friends I had at Grail Academy. A thank-you note from the orphanage I'd visited recently...

There was also a letter from Oliphia inviting me for tea. I quickly penned a response. Things seemed to be going well with her and Claude, and I was looking forward to some girl talk.

I was excited already.

Finishing up the letter, I quickly rechecked my mail.

"Still nothing..." I sighed.

I was so sure it would come today...

I was waiting for a letter from Karina. Ever since my coming-of-age ceremony, I'd been keeping in touch with Daniel and Karina via mail. I was keen to stay on good terms with them. I felt like it was important if I wanted to avoid another catastrophe, like the one that'd ended my old life. Keeping in touch would let me know if anything about them suddenly changed like it did last time.

And also, I really *did* like them both. In this world, I considered them friends. I always really enjoyed reading their letters, writing my responses, and then waiting for them to write back.

Usually, I received a response within a week or so. But this time, it'd been three weeks without a single word. I was worried there might've been some kind of mix-up and my letter had never been delivered. Maybe my Transference

spell hadn't worked properly? So, about ten days ago, I'd sent another one just in case. But today, again, there was no response.

"What's going on, Karina?"

I opened my desk drawer and pulled out the box I was using to store all my previous letters from Karina. The stack was quite thick by now.

I started rereading them. They were full of the kind of discussions that teenage girls love: the latest fashions, popular operas, fascinating novels, boys... She always finished her letters by encouraging me to do my best with my studies and telling me how much she was looking forward to our next meeting.

I read all of them, and then I got to the last letter I'd received from her.

To my dearest Princess Annabel,

How are you? I'm as well as ever.

After receiving your letter the other day, I was inspired to go out on a long ride. It's been a while! I had such fun riding as fast as the wind. Recently, a lot of things have happened to make me feel depressed, but getting out in the fresh air helped a lot.

I have some sad news to share. The other day, the pendant with the Magic Crystal you gave me broke. When I put it on in the morning, it just cracked in two! I liked it so much. It was a terrible loss! If I am able to visit Najir again someday, I'll be sure to buy another one.

Oh yes, I almost forgot to say... Let's talk about your visit to my country! How about three months from now? I'm just dying to show you around! I was thinking of inviting Daniel too. There's this great valley not too far away, where the waterfalls are. I went riding there the other day, actually.

Well, I know we've got a lot on our plates with studying and everything, but let's both do our best! I'm so looking forward to seeing you again.

Your Loving Friend,

Karina

My gaze focused on a certain line in the letter.

Karina had written that the Magic Crystal I gave her when she came to Najir was broken and no longer effective.

Her Magic Crystal broke...

When I first received her letter, I was embarrassed that a Najirian product had broken so easily. I'd written back, saying "I can bring you a replacement crystal when I come to visit you in Nigren, if you like!" But at the time, the fact that the Magic Crystal had suddenly broken hadn't really registered with me.

I hadn't given Karina a fragile, cheap crystal. I'd given her one of Najir's finest crafts, purchased at the most renowned Magic Crystal shop in the land. It was even approved by the Office of the Royal Family.

I'd never heard of one of that shop's Magic Crystals breaking.

"I wonder why it broke? Maybe I should ask Ed..."

I picked up Karina's letter and headed to the Magical Research Lab.

There was an open-air corridor to pass through between my room and the lab. The gardens could be viewed between each of the equidistantly placed pillars.

I wondered if the roses were blooming yet. I spotted a glimpse of crimson red against the deep green and I headed straight to it. I could see couples strolling between the trees.

"Ah!"

I smiled, spotting a familiar pair. It was Hendrick and Lietta, the same couple I'd caught together that one time.

Around the same time I graduated from Grail Academy and became an active Royal, Hendrick had become a full-fledged member of the Imperial Guard, assigned to protect me.

How surprised I was when he took up his post and came to greet me! He must've been squeezing in a quick date with his sweetheart before he came on

duty tonight.



WHEN I arrived at Ed's room in the lab, he was hard at work whipping up a potion.

The desk was strewn with glass medicine bottles, and notebooks were lying open. I took a peek and noted that there were names of herbs jotted down, followed by numbers. He must have been altering a potion's formula bit by bit.

"What are *you* up to?" I asked.

"An experiment. I'm trying to seal magical power into a Magic Sigil. But it's not going well..."

Ed frowned at the bottles on his desk. I watched him. So...his work wasn't going as planned.

Ed was researching ways to make Magic Sigils that could be used even by those without magical power. He'd need to bring this research to fruition within the next year and a half if he was to have even a hope of becoming a Magic Count.

I squeezed my fists tight.

"Hey, Ed, how about taking a walk with me? As a change of pace?"

"A change of...pace?"

"Yeah. Beautiful roses are blooming in the garden. I just love red flowers! They remind me of your eyes..."

I smiled warmly at him.

He blinked, looking surprised for a moment. Then he smiled back.

"I'd like that."

It was true. I really *did* love red flowers. And I was delighted to have secured an impromptu date with Ed. Hopefully, a walk would take his mind off his research problems for a while.

The palace gardens were always spectacular. We employed the finest horticulturalists in the land, of course.

I couldn't help smiling as I gazed at all the beautiful roses. I leaned in to sniff one. It smelled sweet and sophisticated.

"Look, Ed. Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes. They are." Ed was watching me, eyes crinkled at the corners. "They look especially beautiful framing you, Princess."

I blushed, gazing up into his kind, red eyes, my pulse quickening.

"...Thank you."

I wasn't expecting to be complimented instead of the flowers. I tried to cover my red cheeks by cupping my hands around them.

"And you look especially pretty blushing as red as those roses, Princess."

Ed leaned in to whisper in my ear. I could feel his breath tickle me. I shivered with delight.

"Ed..."

You're amazing, too. I wanted to say that, but the words died on my lips.

I noticed someone over Ed's shoulder. Someone familiar, hurrying along the covered walkway.

Chestnut-brown hair reminiscent of fall. Wearing the grey robes of a Civil Official. Ed turned to see who I was looking at.

"Claude!"

Claude stopped hurrying along at the sound of my voice and looked over, clutching his books under his arm.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

Claude started jogging across the lawn toward us. His cheeks were red, as if he was excited about something.

"Bel! We just got some news. Nigren and the Sunruta Kingdom are to forge a political alliance via marriage!"

This was news indeed.

"Nigren and...and the Sunruta Kingdom?"

I wasn't sure I'd heard him right, so I asked Claude just to make sure.

Nothing like that had happened in my old timeline. The two countries had never had such an alliance. But then again, this world was different from my old one in so many ways. It wasn't so odd for an event to happen in this timeline that hadn't occurred in the old one.

"Yep, Sunruta's Prince Daniel and Nigren's Princess Karina. Nothing's official as of yet; they're still in the negotiating stages."

"Daniel and...and *Karina?!'*" my voice came out in a hoarse cry.

I was shocked. *My two friends are to be wed?*

For some reason, I'd assumed the marriage was between different members of their families. This was unsettling on many levels, given what had happened in the last timeline and what I knew of my friends.

"I hear Princess Karina strongly requested it. Apparently, she's been crazy for Prince Daniel ever since your coming-of-age ceremony, Bel! She started pestering her parents about it right after the visit, and they wasted no time initiating negotiations. We still don't know how interested Daniel's family is. But, if the engagement is confirmed, then the Sunruta Kingdom will have a great deal of influence over Nigren. It would be an advantageous move for them to be sure.

"I...I see..."

I was deeply disturbed, only half-listening as Claude filled me in on the latest political gossip. *I wish I didn't have to be so concerned about my friends getting married, but something feels very off given what I know...*

After we waved Claude off, I turned to Ed beside me. He looked down at me, as if he'd something he wanted to say.

"Ed...what is it?"

"I was *certain* that Prince Daniel had eyes only for you, Princess. Especially when I saw you together during your coming-of-age celebration. As for Princess Karina...to be honest with you, I don't know. She certainly seemed to be good friends with Prince Daniel. But I can't say I saw any sparks."

Ed went on to say that perhaps, though, the marriage really was more for political benefit. I had to agree with him. Karina had certainly seemed quite fond of Daniel, but their relationship was more like brother and sister than romantic.

But perhaps I simply hadn't noticed that Karina was secretly crazy for Daniel all along? Or perhaps it was just as Ed said, and it was more of a political arrangement?

I cast my mind back to a distant, painful memory.

In the old timeline, it was Daniel and me who'd been engaged.

My coming-of-age ceremony was when we had gotten together. Right about now, we would've been in our engagement period. Then, on my eighteenth birthday, I'd gone to Sunruta to join Daniel, and Karina had appeared while we were preparing for our wedding.

Then, before I knew what was happening, our engagement had been canceled, and I'd been thrown into the dungeons. Daniel was like a completely different person all of a sudden. And Karina had seemed to hate me, despite not even knowing me. Why had she given me such a look of pure hatred? To this day, I still didn't know. It didn't fit with the girl I had become friends with.

"Actually, Daniel said something to me after the ceremony. He said he asked my father for permission to marry me, and Father had told him to wait two years. All to give *you* a chance, Ed."

This was the first time I'd spoken to Ed about this.

Ed's red eyes widened. Then he breathed a long sigh of relief.

"I'm certainly glad I said something to your father before Daniel's visit."

Ed had chosen to approach Father before my coming-of-age ceremony, knowing that visitors would be coming from all around and that many royals would ask for my hand.

That's how Ed had gained the advantage for himself.

If Karina really *did* marry Daniel, there'd be no danger of Daniel and I being engaged. That seemed to have been the catalyst of all the trouble in the old

timeline.

This should've made me very happy indeed. But there was still something that was bothering me. Something didn't seem right.

"Princess? What is it?"

Ed was gazing at me with concern.

Perhaps Ed misconstrued my stricken expression for disappointment or jealousy over Daniel becoming engaged to Karina. I didn't want him thinking that. Not even for a moment!

I peered into Ed's eyes and smiled.

"Hey, Ed...can we stay together a little longer?"

"...Princess?" Ed looked confused for a moment, then crinkled up his eyes again and nodded. "Of course. As you wish, Princess."

His warm smile was like sunshine.

I linked arms with him, and we headed back to the rose garden again. There were beautiful roses blooming as high as my head and the scent was just dreamy.

Everything was going well.

History would not repeat itself. This world was increasingly proving itself to be different from the old one. Now all that was left was for Ed to become a Magic Count and then claim me as his bride. Then we would live happily ever after.

But still, there was that little seed of doubt growing in my mind.

I squeezed Ed's arm tighter, wanting to forget about it.

"Wasn't there something you wanted to talk to me about, Princess?"

"Eh?"

I blinked in surprise as Ed looked down at me.

Oh yes, Claude's arrival had distracted me. I'd wanted to ask Ed about Karina's Magic Crystal and why it had broken out of the blue like that. I quickly asked him about it.

“Her Magic Crystal just broke...?” Ed rubbed his chin thoughtfully, mulling it over. “It’s true; Magic Crystals do break on occasion.”

“They do?”

“Yes. Mostly when they’re fakes: counterfeit products. And also when there’s too much magical power overloaded within them. But this Magic Crystal you’re talking about, I infused it myself, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. And then I gave it to Karina.”

“Then I don’t think that scenario’s likely at all. The only other possibility is that the crystal’s protection power was all used up during some sort of attack and it shattered.”

“Some...some sort of *attack*?” I frowned in alarm.

“Did the letter say anything else unusual?”

“No...not a thing.”

I went over the letter, which was still fresh in my mind. There was nothing suspicious written there.

Ed rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Then I’m afraid I simply don’t know. If we had the broken crystal, I could analyze it. And if anything happened to Karina, our political affairs officers would have brought the news. So I don’t think you need to worry about her. Anyway, from the news that Claude brought us, I’d say she’s doing very well indeed. You can ask her more about it during your visit to Nigren, can’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, you’re right...”

Ed was right. If anything bad happened to Karina, we’d already know about it. And hadn’t Claude just come to tell us Karina was practically engaged? She was doing great; that much was obvious.

So then why did she suddenly stop sending letters right after the crystal broke?

In her final letter, Karina had asked me to visit her in Nigren. No doubt an official invitation would arrive at the Royal International Affairs Office any day

now.

I can ask her what's up when I see her in person. I couldn't do much about it until then.

I decided to just concentrate on enjoying this special time with Ed.



WHEN I got back to my room after our walk, a single envelope was sitting on my desk.

"It's from Nigren?"

I turned it over. The gold seal depicted a dragon holding an orb, which I recognized as Nigren's official seal. Figuring it must be from Karina, I ripped the envelope open.

I quickly scanned the text, wondering what she could possibly have to say.

But it turned out to be an official invitation from the Nigren International Affairs Office. The ivory-colored paper was of the highest quality, and it said: *We Request The Pleasure of Your Company in Our Land of Nigren.* The signature on the bottom right was that of Nigren's International Affairs Minister.

"It's an official invitation..."

In her final letter, Karina had asked me to visit. And now she'd made it official with an invitation. The date of my visit was set for two months from today.

"Maybe she figured she didn't *need* to write a personal letter? That the official invitation would suffice?"

I carefully put the invitation back in the envelope and placed it on my desk.

"Maybe I'll include a letter to her with my official response..."

I could return my official correspondence to the Nigren International Affairs Office by going through Najir's. That way, I could be certain there'd be no mix-up with the Transference spell.

I quickly grabbed my pen and scribbled a quick letter to Karina, saying how delighted I was with her invitation, how happy I was to be visiting Nigren for the first time, and how excited I was to see her again. All the while, I felt doubt

clawing at the back of my mind.

8. The Royal Palace of Nigren

I'D made it to the kingdom of Nigren.

Nigren, located to the south of Najir, was warm year-round. It was a dry heat without much humidity, so it was very pleasant in the shade. It was comfortable enough to spend all day outside.

Nigren also boasted an aqua-blue ocean around most of its landmass, breathtaking in its beauty and so unlike the indigo blue seas that lapped Najir's northernmost tip. It seemed to sparkle in the sunlight and became an even deeper shade of blue the further you went from shore.

"Look, Ed! The sea changes color!"

"It does indeed."

Ed was standing beside me, gazing out at the endless ocean. There were boats bobbing on the waves, ranging in size from two-person rowboats to large galleons.

The Royal Magicians at our palace's Magical Research Lab had recently installed a Magic Sigil to facilitate travel by Transference between the major cities. It looked a lot like the secret Sigil located in Charles's closet, but this one was public, used by the royal officials to travel between municipalities. I was sure it hadn't existed in my old timeline. It was yet another form of proof that this world was very different from my old one.

We'd traveled to a city near the border using this Magic Sigil, and from there, we'd boarded a carriage the rest of the way. Since we didn't need to travel across Najir physically, we were able to arrive in Nigren's capital, Bulben, in only three days.

"Shall we get going, Princess Annabel?"

I heard a voice behind me as I was gazing outside. I turned to see Hendrick, looking overheated in his white knight uniform with the long sleeves.

Hendrick was currently employed as one of my personal guards in the position Ed held in the old world. Despite being a member of the Armed Guard, he was proficient with magic as well. He could have even become a Magic Knight if he'd wanted to.

"Just a little longer, please? Oh, Hendrick, don't you think it's just lovely here?"

"I do, Princess. It's stunning." Hendrick gazed out at the ocean behind me. His eyes were a similar aqua-blue.

"Don't you wish you could show this to Lietta?"

Hendrick blinked rapidly at this. Then he looked out at the ocean again, smiling. "Yes," he said, "I'd like to bring her here someday."

"I hope you can. We only get one life. We have to do everything we want to do in the time we have. Otherwise, it'll be too late and all we'll be left with is regret."

Well...for most people, it's like that, I thought to myself.

"You're right, Princess. I'll make sure to remember that." Hendrick lowered his head to me politely.

I grinned wryly back at him.

Hendrick was a very good knight and bodyguard, but he tended to be a little too serious. I had the feeling he was too focused on work to take more than a day or two off. He'd never be able to bring Lietta here like that.

Oh, I know! I can offer him two weeks' paid vacation as a wedding gift when he marries Lietta. That'll solve it! I grinned to myself, picturing the look on Hendrick's face when I sprung my surprise wedding gift upon him.

"You seem to be amused by something, Princess?"

"What? Me? Just, uh...admiring the view!"

Ed was looking at me, one eyebrow raised.

Oh, yikes! Smirking isn't very ladylike of me!

I quickly composed my features and readjusted my sunhat.

Hendrick was right, though. We needed to get going. We were going to be late for our arrival at the Nigren palace.

“Your hand, Princess.”

Hendrick opened the door to the carriage and helped both my maid Ellie and me climb inside. Ed and the other magicians got into the carriage behind ours.

Charles received an invitation to visit Nigren as well, but he had some official business that’d been in the works for a while, so it was decided that only I would go this time. I was accompanied by Ellie, several knights, and several diplomats, including Claude. I also brought several magicians, including Ed, since Karina had specifically asked me to bring some of my country’s best magicians.

“You must be very excited to see Princess Karina again, since the two of you are such good friends.”

Ellie smiled at me from the next seat over as I gazed out the window at the sea. The carriage clattered and jostled us, but I could never get tired of the view.

Ellie knew that Karina and I had enjoyed tea together almost every day while she was visiting Najir and that we’d been exchanging regular letters ever since.

“I *am* excited. Very excited!”

I’d sent a letter to Karina along with my official response, using the International Affairs Office this time. And I’d gotten a reply back too! Only, it was sort of brief. She just politely thanked me for accepting the invitation and asked me to bring some of our best magicians with me when I came. There was none of our usual friendly gossip included this time. It was strange.

And I was very disappointed.

I smiled back at Ellie and turned my gaze back to the ocean again.

I suppose I can ask her what’s wrong when I see her.

I wondered if I might’ve done something to upset Karina, but nothing came to mind as a possibility.

A flock of sea birds soared calmly together in the cloudless blue sky overhead.



THAT evening, we arrived at the Nigren Palace as scheduled.

The palace was located on a clifftop a slight distance from the ocean.

We were immediately met by officials and escorted to our rooms. From the terrace of my room, I had a great view of the town spread out below, stretching all the way to the sea. It felt very “Nigren.” After all, the country itself was located on a peninsula surrounded mostly by ocean.

“The ocean looks orange in the light of the setting sun, doesn’t it?”

The ocean was all orange and pink tones, just like the sky above it. I could see boats here and there, bobbing on the waves. It was a rare sight to behold and I drank it all in.

“For such a big country, it’s not a very tall palace.”

Nigren’s palace was built with only three levels. It felt quite low to the ground compared to the towers and spires of the palaces belonging to Najir and the Sunruta Kingdom. I was a little surprised by that. Nigren had so much more landmass than Najir, so I’d been expecting a larger palace as well.

“It’s built low on purpose because of the strong winds coming off the ocean.”

The explanation was provided by Claude, who’d come to my room to go over the upcoming schedule with me. He would be taking care of most diplomatic matters during our visit.

“Tonight, we have the welcome dinner, followed by a party attended by the local aristocracy. Then a meeting with the Prime Minister of Nigren. After that, a casual meeting with the Diplomatic Minister of Nigren. Then a tour of the castle and the town...” Claude was going over his notes, explaining the itinerary of our trip.

My feelings of excitement started to fade. At first, I’d felt like I was on vacation.

But listening to Claude now, it seemed like our schedule was very full, with little time for relaxing or sightseeing. But then I reminded myself that I had to take this visit seriously and focus on forging good international relations.

Especially if I wanted to avoid a repeat of the disastrous ending I'd met with in the previous life, which was only two years in the future from now.

So I focused on the itinerary, my head swimming with the details.

"So, I'll be able to see Princess Karina at tonight's dinner, right?" I had to ask.

"Yes, that is the plan. And, as we knew before coming, Prince Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom will be in attendance as well. He arrived yesterday, apparently."

"Daniel too? What fun!"

I smiled. I really *was* happy to be seeing my friends again.

After finishing up with the itinerary, Claude left for his own room. I asked Ellie to help me change. I'd been invited to dinner, and as the representative of my country, I wanted to wear something appropriate.

I chose a light green dress.

It was an elegant dress, the draped silk laying in folds with delicate lacework on the cuffs. The bodice had lace and yellow flowers embroidered upon it. It was so gorgeous.

"Princess Annabel, take this." Ellie held out a yellow diamond.

I took off the Magic Stone pendant I'd gotten from the Ed of the old world and put it away in my jewelry box. Then I put on the yellow diamond instead. I also wore the gold, delicate hair accessory with the red stone from my Ed.

The Nigren royal family and Daniel and his people were in attendance at dinner. And, of course, my friends from Najir and I. It was quite a crowd.

I broke into a smile as I walked into the room with its long dining table and saw my friends.

"Princess Karina, it's been too long! Thank you so much for inviting me! Your country is just gorgeous!"

"It's great to see you again, Princess Annabel."

I dashed over to Karina and she stood up to greet me. But her greeting sounded somewhat clipped. I hesitated, not sure how to react in front of all

these strangers. I assumed she would've been more excited to see me. I decided to temper my reaction for now.

The dinner consisted of mainly seafood dishes. I'd been expecting this. Karina had written in one of her letters that the people of Nigren favored seafood over meat, since their country was surrounded by the ocean.

"Princess Annabel, I hear your country is rich with magic. You've brought some of your magicians with you, I take it?"

As I tasted the seafood, I was directly addressed by the man seated opposite me. It was Nigren's Crown Prince, Harold, whose name was pronounced with a silent H.

Prince Harold was Karina's older brother and he was in his mid-twenties. He had the same flaming red hair and emerald green eyes as Karina, and he seemed nice and friendly. He was married to the daughter of a Nigrenian duke, and his wife was apparently pregnant. Since she wasn't in attendance, I figured she was probably due soon.

"That's correct. I've brought the finest magicians Najir has to offer with me on this visit."

"After Karina got back from Najir, your magic and spells were all she could talk about. She told me she saw one of your magicians change his appearance at will. Did you bring him too?"

"Oh yes, I did."

"Well, I do hope he will give us a demonstration during his visit," Harold said, smiling. "Actually, Karina came back from Najir a changed woman. She suddenly announced she was going to start seriously studying magic, and she's been obsessed with her studies ever since."

Harold raised his glass to Karina, who shook her head, frowning.

But Harold continued in a jovial manner, wine slopping up the sides of his glass.

"It's just a shame that poor Elena has been in bed sick. She would've loved to join in the festivities. Just think...actual Najirian magicians, here in Nigren, and

she's missing all the fun!"

"Elena...?"

I remembered that name. She was the highly-esteemed Nigrenian magician who'd made the visit to Najir.

"Elena is sick?" I asked.

"Very sick. She's been in bed for two...no, three months now. The doctors can't figure out what's wrong with her!" Harold put down his glass, frowning.

"Our Royal Magicians are proficient in healing magic. Perhaps they could examine her?" I suggested. "They may be able to use certain treatments that normal doctors cannot."

All of a sudden, a chair toppled over and hit the floor with a crash.

"We don't need your help! Elena is being cared for by our finest doctors, thank you very much!"

The room fell silent as everyone stared at Karina, who'd suddenly stood up and started shouting. The atmosphere in the room instantly grew heavy and unpleasant.

"I...I apologize. I'm not feeling well. Please excuse me..."

Karina suddenly paled, as if realizing the scene she was causing. Then she quickly left the table. A maid hurried out of the room after her, looking extremely worried.

Harold watched them go, then turned to me with a sigh. "I'm sorry you had to see that. Karina is very close to Elena. I'm afraid she's taken her illness hard."

"It's quite all right. I should've held my tongue."

I stared down at my plate, wishing the ground would open and swallow me whole. I only wanted to help, but I never should've stuck my nose into another country's private affairs that way.

Three months...that coincided with when Karina had suddenly stopped responding to my letters. *Perhaps Karina was so troubled by Elena's sickness that she couldn't write? Is that why she doesn't seem to be behaving like*

herself?

“Not at all, Princess Annabel.” Harold shook his head. “Never mind what Karina says. I think it’d be a great idea for your magicians to take a look at Elena. I mean, we don’t even know what it *is* she’s sick from. I’ll show you to her room sometime, when Karina is otherwise engaged. So, what do you say? Will you do it?”

“Yes, of course. Najir is happy to help Nigren with anything it requires.”

“Thank you. Ah, by the way, Princess Annabel, is there anywhere in particular you’d like to visit while you’re here?”

After that, Harold changed the subject to lighter matters. I think he was trying to make up for the unpleasant scene from before. But Karina’s outburst had deeply upset me and snuffed out all my feelings of excitement.

After dinner, Daniel got to his feet from his place further down the table and came over to say hello. He was wearing a pale brown frock coat and looked very dashing.

“Princess Annabel, are you well?”

“Oh yes, very well. Thank you.”

“That’s splendid. Your beauty has only increased since last we met! How about a date while we’re both here visiting?”

“And I can see *you’re* in fine spirits as usual. I’m glad to see you well too, my prince.” I responded to his causal flirtation with a little joke of my own.

Daniel raised an eyebrow, clearly caught off-guard by my wit. “It was a genuine request, not a joke, Princess.”

“So...I assume you asked Karina on a date as well, to make things nice and even?” I raised both eyebrows and grinned.

Daniel responded with a wry smile. *Aha!*

But then Daniel’s smile quickly faded and his gaze became somber.

“Actually, I need to talk to you about something in private.” Daniel lowered his voice to a whisper, looking over his shoulder. But at this late hour, a stroll in

the gardens wasn't feasible. And we couldn't very well talk in either of our rooms at night without attracting suspicion.

"How about tomorrow in the morning?"

"I have to meet the Minister. What about the afternoon?"

"No, that's when I have to meet the Minister. Before the banquet in the evening then? We'll probably finish around teatime."

"All right." Daniel nodded, still gazing somberly at me.

It sounds like something really important. I wonder what it could be?

Maybe it was something that affected our two countries. *In that case, I should have Claude join us.* Just as I was mulling it over, someone said "Princess Annabel" from behind me.

I turned to see Prince Harold.

"May I speak with you a moment?"

"Yes, of course." I smiled and nodded. Daniel nodded politely to Harold and excused himself, leaving the dining hall. Harold watched him go before turning back to face me.

"About what we discussed earlier...may I make that an official request?"

"Um...what part?"

"The part about Elena."

I stopped smiling as soon as I heard that name.

"You want me to see if I can heal her."

"Yes. That."

Harold's green eyes were focused directly on my own.

"I believe you may've heard this from Karina already, but Elena is one of the ones who have magical powers as a result of a genetic mutation. She lived in the Eastern mountains until she was ten years old, with no one aware of her magic. When she was first brought into the palace, she was very wary of people and wouldn't open up to anyone. She'd use her magic to intimidate anyone

who tried to get close. Many were hurt by her. We were at a loss about how to handle her, but then Karina stepped in. She announced that she'd be the girl's protector, since they were close in age. And it's been that way ever since."

"It sounds like Karina really cares for her."

"Yes, very much. Elena's always been expressionless like a doll. But Karina kept talking to her, kept trying. She's overprotective of her, even now. She's had the girl's bed moved into her own chambers and won't permit a doctor to visit without also being present. I think she's taking it a bit too far, myself."

Harold shrugged, palms facing upright.

"In her *own* chambers?"

That was a bit weird. I could understand Karina's concern, but why move the girl into her own room, practically becoming her nurse? She didn't even know if the illness was contagious.

"Karina hasn't been herself lately at all. I don't know whether it's exhaustion from nursing Elena or just frustration over the situation. You noticed it too, didn't you, Princess Annabel?"

I nodded vaguely in response.

It was true, though. The angry shrieking Karina at the dinner table didn't resemble the friend I knew much at all. She was eerily like the Karina I'd glimpsed in my last timeline, though.

"Do you think Karina will agree to some of my men treating Elena?"

"In all probability, no. But I still want Elena examined. She's a valuable asset to our country. After returning from Najir, she showed us a form of magic where she created matter from thin air. She said she learned it during her visit. It was amazing. No one else in Nigren could do something like that. Only Elena."

"She made...something from thin air?"

From what I knew of magic, that didn't sound right.

"Yes. She held her palm upright like so and conjured a little stone there out of absolutely nothing."

Harold held his palm upright, tapping it with the index finger of his other hand.

I couldn't be sure without seeing it myself, but from Harold's explanation, it sounded like Elena had used either Transference magic or Material Composition magic.

With Transference magic, you could send something from your possession to another physical location, or you could draw something from a different location right to you. Material Composition magic was self-explanatory. Both were extremely high-level spells.

Only a few magicians in Najir could use such spells competently. I certainly made a mess of them every time I tried. Yet Elena had mastered the spell in the space of one short visit to Najir?

"Anyway, it's of vital importance to our country that Elena regains her health. I understand that Karina wants to take care of her friend, but enough is enough. I need your assistance, Princess Annabel."

Harold brought the subject back to his favor while I was still thinking hard about magic.

I frowned, racking my brains.

Karina's behavior at dinner made me certain she wouldn't take too kindly to me interfering. Even if Harold managed to keep her in check, I knew Karina would still burn with resentment.

But Harold needed our help. He didn't want to lose a vital asset to his country's future.

Considering my old world's timeline, two years remained until Karina and Daniel's political marriage and the immediate invasion of Najir. The timeline had already changed so much, but there was still no guarantee I wasn't facing the exact same fate.

I wanted to keep relations with Nigren as friendly as possible to hopefully prevent that. Which meant that I needed to earn the goodwill of Nigren's crown prince, Harold.

“All right. We’ll come by tomorrow morning to see Elena. I’ll bring one of my magicians with me. I’m sure Elena will be pleased to see some new magic, if nothing else. Perhaps she’ll explain things to Karina so that she’ll be all right with it.

“That’s a great idea! After all, Karina invited your magicians here for Elena’s benefit. She mentioned she was writing to you to make sure you brought them specifically.” Harold smiled, nodding.

Karina wrote asking me to bring my magicians for Elena’s benefit?

Thinking back on it, that made sense. I’d brought Ed because of the letter Karina sent specifically asking me to bring my magicians along.

“Then we’ll proceed with the plan tomorrow.”

I smiled, nodding slightly to Claude, who was waiting behind me. Claude bowed, knowing what I wanted.

9. Visiting the Sick One

CLAUDE hadn't been working in his position for very long, but he was already a skilled diplomat. As I'd requested of him the previous evening, he set up a meeting with Karina the next day, during the morning.

As expected, Karina didn't complain when we said that we just wanted to visit Elena to see how she was and show her some new magic.

I dressed in a cream dress—my most modest piece—with just a few bows at the neckline and hips. Then I pulled a small, light-blue box from my trunk. It was tied with a white ribbon.

Inside was a hairpiece with a Magic Crystal. Karina had written in her letter that her original one had broken, so I'd brought this one to replace it. Of course, I had Ed cast another protective spell on it, too.

Just as I was finishing getting ready, there was a knock on the door. Ellie answered it. Once the door was open, I could see a Nigrenian civil official, plus my guard, Hendrick, and also the two magicians I'd brought from Najir. One was Ed, of course. The other was a man named Toll.

"Shall we get going? Where are the flowers?"

"Prince Harold had these prepared for us."

Ellie didn't miss a beat. She showed me the vase of flowers the civil official had brought.

The vase was filled with gorgeous lavender flowers. It was quite big and required both of Ellie's hands to hold it, but it wasn't so big as to have been too gaudy. It was perfect. Harold had chosen well.

"I see. Then, let us go."

I stood up from my chair and the civil official, Harold's right-hand man, led the way to Karina's chambers.



I couldn't explain it, but...something didn't feel right.

Once we entered Karina's room, the air felt heavy somehow.

If you asked me what exactly was wrong, I couldn't tell you, but as soon as I stepped into the room, I felt it. It was something oppressive. As if some unknown magical power was concentrated there...

I looked back over my shoulder to see Ed enter the room and immediately frown, as if deep in thought. He must've noticed whatever it was I had.

"Thank you for letting us come to see you on such short notice."

I grasped my skirts and curtsied. Karina nodded curtly in response. She'd come to receive us at the door. Now, she turned around. I looked past Karina to see that she was heading over to the windows.

When I saw the small figure sitting there, I was taken aback.

There was a sofa and table set located in front of the window. Elena was sitting on the sofa, hugging her knees, looking extremely pale and drawn, as if she might vanish at any moment.

Her cheeks were sunken and her eyes were unfocused. She wore a light pink, loose dress and gazed absently out the windows.

"Elena, you've got guests."

Karina spoke to her. Finally, Elena seemed to become aware of our presence, turning her gaze this way. The next moment, her eyes widened rapidly.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Miss Elena? It's me, Annabel, Princess of Najir. I heard you weren't feeling well, so I came to pay you a visit."

I lowered my head in a polite greeting.

Elena stayed staring this way for a moment. Her eyes had the look of one who'd given up on life, but just for a moment, I thought I saw a spark of life there. Then her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Lady Elena?"

I was alarmed by her sudden tears and wasn't sure what to say.

But Elena said nothing. She just sat there, tears dripping down her chin. She kept opening and closing her mouth like she wanted to say something. But no words came out.

“It’s all right. I’m sure she’s just overwhelmed with gratitude by your visit.”

Karina placed a hand on Elena’s shoulder, smiling as if to say: “What a silly thing you are!” But Elena just looked up at Karina with fear and anxiety in her eyes.

Hmm? What’s going on here?

Seeing Elena and Karina interact increased my discomfort.

It was a nice scene: the privileged princess comforting her most trusted magician friend. But there was a hard look in Karina’s eyes that I couldn’t help noticing. I was sure I hadn’t imagined it, either. Something intimidating was there.

The next moment, though, Karina turned to face us, smiling her usual warm smile. I couldn’t see any hint of unkindness in those gentle eyes—it was almost a little too perfect of a switch.

“Elena, some magicians from Najir have come today to show you some magic. Won’t that be fun?” Karina leaned down a little and took Elena’s hand. Elena blinked in confusion for a few seconds, but then she smiled too.

Toll was the first to demonstrate some magic for Elena.

He started with simple Levitation magic by making a pen float above his palm. It was simple stuff. We studied it at Grail Academy. Even children could cast such a spell in Najir.

But Elena’s eyes widened, and she reached out tentatively to put her hand between the floating pen and Toll’s hand. Once she realized it really was floating, her face lit up with joy.

“Wow...” Speaking for the first time, Elena’s voice sounded like that of an excited child.

“You must’ve been able to conjure this kind of magic easily enough before you fell sick, Miss Elena?”

Apparently, Elena could use Transference magic as well as Material Composition. Levitation magic should have been child's play for her.

But when I made a comment to that effect, surprised that Elena was acting like she'd never seen Levitation before, Elena's face resumed the same stricken expression from just before.

She opened and closed her mouth like she wanted to say something, but no words came out.

After that, Ed and Toll took turns to show her some increasingly difficult magic. Ed conjured a flame in midair then transformed it into the shape of a phoenix. Elena's eyes lit up and she beamed with excitement. After every demonstration, she turned excitedly to the next magician, her eyes filled with anticipation.

I was relieved to see that Elena was enjoying it so much. Far more than I'd expected her to, in fact.

She seems much more expressive than the last time we met.

When Karina brought Elena to Najir, she'd been very expressionless and non-demonstrative. I'd thought her a bit cold and felt sure I'd have trouble getting to know her. She'd barely spoken then, too. But now, Elena seemed somehow very different.

"Hey... We want to see some *new* magic. Like we saw when we came to Najir."

After about an hour, Karina suddenly made a request.

"Elena's a magician. So it'll be a good learning experience for her."

I nodded to Ed and Toll. They spoke to each other for a few moments, then Ed stepped forward.

"How about the Illusion you saw last time?"

"We've already *seen* that one. Haven't you got anything else?"

Ed frowned.

Clearly, he hadn't been expecting such a refusal.

“Our magicians are hard at work day and night on new forms of magic. But we’ve nothing else that’s complete as of now. The magic we’re researching now would be very hard for outsiders to comprehend.”

“What do you mean, ‘hard to comprehend?’”

Karina sounded most interested. Ed thought for a moment but seemed not to know how to answer. Instead, Toll stepped in.

“Edoile is working on creating Magic Sigils that can be used even by non-magical folk. And I’m currently researching magic that can be used to obscure memories. It falls under the Illusion category of magic.”

“Magic that obscures memories! How fascinating!”

Karina gave Toll a beseeching look, palms pressed together.

Seeing this, Elena suddenly went pale.

“No! You *can’t!*”

Elena had leaped to her feet, shouting. She was extremely pale and looked like she’d keel over at any second.

“Elena! She needs help!”

I turned to Ed in a panic. Ed nodded, stepping forward to lay hands on Elena so that he could apply some healing magic. But as he touched her, his expression grew stiff.

“Sorry, it looks like she’s had enough for today. Perhaps another time.”

Then Karina took hold of Elena’s arm and pulled her away, out of Ed’s reach. Then she stepped in front of the girl, as if to hide her from view.

“Yes, of course. We mustn’t stay any longer. We wouldn’t want to keep Elena from her rest. Please excuse us.”

We all turned and left Elena’s room, aware that our presence was no longer desired.



AS we walked down the hallway away from Karina’s room, I realized I was still holding something in my hand. Looking down at it, I gasped.

“Oh *no!* I forgot to give it to her...”

I was holding the box containing the hair accessory with the Magic Crystal I meant to give to Karina.

“You’ve still plenty of time during your visit. Why don’t you just give it to her later?”

“Oh, you’re right! I’ll do that.”

Claude smiled at me reassuringly and I smiled back. Tonight was the ball. I would definitely see Karina there. I could give her my gift then.

“Once we get back to my room, can we go over the guests who’ll be attending the ball one more time?”

Claude nodded, pleased by my request.

The ball would be a spectacular affair.

Dignitaries from all over Nigren would be attending to welcome Daniel and me. I wanted to make sure I didn’t make any mistakes that’d damage Najir’s image.

I had to make sure I familiarized myself fully with the names and backgrounds of every single guest.

“But first...” I turned to face Ed and Toll, who were walking behind us. “Did you figure anything out about Elena’s mystery ailment?”

We went to see Karina and Elena today on the pretext of a magical demonstration because Prince Harold had asked us for help figuring out Elena’s illness.

We spent around an hour in close proximity to Elena, so I figured the two magicians might’ve been able to learn something about what was plaguing her.

But Ed met my look of expectation with a somber frown.

“Actually...there’s something that concerns me about that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe the Lady Elena is under the influence of magic. Strong magic, at that.”

“What?” I frowned. This was unexpected.

“When she swooned just then, I touched her skin. At that moment, I clearly felt the presence of strong magic acting upon her.” Ed explained what he felt today, choosing his words carefully.

“So you’re saying that...Elena has been cursed?” I lowered my voice, speaking in hushed tones.

Elena was suffering from a mystery ailment and her body was shrouded with magic. The first conclusion I came to was that she’d been cursed. A curse was a type of damaging magic cast on an enemy to weaken them.

“I only felt it for a second, so I can’t say for sure. But it didn’t really feel like a curse. All I know is that she’s under the influence of powerful magic. I’m not even sure I could cast such heavy magic on another person.”

“It’s *that* bad?”

Ed was the finest magician in all the world, the pride of the Royal Magicians of Najir. Now he was saying that someone had afflicted Elena with magic stronger than his own?

“But Elena is Nigren’s finest magician, isn’t she? Who could’ve done such a thing to someone like her?”

“About that, I don’t know. All I know is that it’s a type of magic that doesn’t last for long. It needs to be continuously recast. That means whoever is behind it has to be someone near Elena.”

“Someone close to Elena...”

Karina’s letters had never really mentioned any other magicians but Elena, had they? I thought back over all the letters I’d received from her, but I couldn’t recall a single name.

“Why did she suddenly stand up screaming like that, though?” I was still confused by Elena’s sudden, dramatic outburst.

Toll had just been about to show us the new memory-obscuring magic he was researching, but Elena’s shrieks had put a stop to that.

“I don’t know what that was about, either. I want to spend more time

examining Elena. If possible, without Princess Karina present.”

I nodded, understanding what Ed wanted. If he was to properly treat Elena, Karina couldn’t be there. She’d only try to stop it, otherwise. But why?

“Let’s speak to Prince Harold and ask him if he can engineer an opportunity for us.”

I nodded to Claude, who nodded briskly back.

I wonder what could be going on...

As we walked down the beautifully decorated corridor, I replayed the scene in Karina’s room in my mind. And I thought about how Karina had been in general, ever since we arrived here.

Something wasn’t right.

I could feel *something* gnawing away at the back of my brain. Some kind of suspicion, but I just didn’t know what it was.



THAT evening, I headed out to the gazebo in the gardens.

The Nigren palace gardens were filled with tropical plants, so it was quite a fascinating place. Over the garden wall, I could see the town below, with the sparkling ocean in the distance. The sun’s rays shone down upon the ocean’s smooth surface, making it sparkle.

“Princess Annabel, have you been waiting long?”

Someone spoke to me as I was gazing out at the scenery. I turned to see Daniel there, wearing a casual shirt that was loose at the collar. He was walking across the grass toward me.

“Oh, no. I only just got here myself.”

I watched as Daniel entered the gazebo and sat opposite me, smiling.

“I see.”

Daniel looked relieved. Then his gaze flickered to Hendrick, who was standing a short distance away guarding me. After that, he looked at me again.

“He’s not here today? The tall fellow you’ve always got with you?”

“Who?”

“You know, with the black hair...”

“Oh, Edoile? He’s a Royal Magician; he’s not my bodyguard or anything.”

“He’s a *Royal Magician*? He’s not a *knight*?”

“No.”

I shook my head. My knight was Hendrick, not Ed. At least, this time around.

Daniel looked confused.

“Why, did I make a mistake and introduce him to you as my knight before or something?”

“No, no...come to think of it, you introduced him very clearly as a Royal Magician. I think I just got things switched around in my mind somehow.”

Daniel waved his hand dismissively and sat back against the gazebo’s sofa. Then he stretched and yawned.

“All morning with the Foreign Affairs Minister, then all afternoon with the Construction Bureau’s Chief. This is the first chance I’ve had to relax since we *got* to Nigren. Ah, it’s nice and warm here, isn’t it?”

“It is. You must’ve been working very hard.”

I’d been busy too. I’d spent the morning in Karina’s chambers, and then I’d had a meeting with the Foreign Affairs Minister this afternoon. Daniel was right, though. Nigren really *was* a beautiful country. And the weather was fantastic.

“What did you talk about with the Foreign Affairs Minister?” he asked.

“Oh, exporting magical technology, dispatching magicians for temporary residency, things like that. What about you?”

“Oh, new architectural techniques, mostly. Well, we talked about various things...” Daniel trailed off awkwardly.

Judging from his expression, it was something he didn’t feel comfortable discussing with me. It was probably about the political marriage arrangements

that Claude had already told me about.

“Are you going to get engaged to Princess Karina?” I cut right to the chase. Daniel’s ice-blue eyes opened wide.

“You *know* about that?”

“Staying up to date on current affairs is something every country needs to prioritize. The Sunruta Kingdom’s no different, right?”

I tilted my head to one side and gazed at him. Daniel chuckled with amusement.

“You’re right about that.” Then Daniel fell silent for a few minutes, looking at me. “But at the present time, I’ve no intention of getting engaged to Princess Karina.”

“Why not?”

“Because I already planned to get engaged to you first.”

I suddenly remembered what he’d said at my coming-of-age ceremony about waiting two years.

I shrugged.

“Princess Karina’s a wonderful woman, you know.”

“Yes, she is.”

Daniel fell silent again, gazing off into the distance. Then his expression sharpened and he focused his gaze on me once more.

“Princess Annabel, do you think the Princess Karina we met yesterday is *really* the same Karina that we know?”

I looked back at Daniel in silence, trying to get a feel for what he thought of the situation.

“Don’t you get the impression she’s an entirely different person now? Is it *really* her? The Princess Karina we knew?” Daniel kept pressing me with the question, his expression somber.

It was true that Karina had seemed irritated during the entire visit so far. She was nothing like the happy, smiling Karina I’d met before. But what was Daniel

trying to say? She *was* Princess Karina, the Princess of Nigren. *Who else could she be?*

“I don’t really know what to say about that. She’s definitely not acting like herself, though.”

Daniel looked out into the distance again.

I turned to see the great blue ocean stretching all the way to the horizon.

“Princess Annabel...did you open my souvenir?”

“What?”

“The souvenir I gave you when you left the Sunruta Kingdom. The puzzle box.”

Ah, yes. Now I remembered.

At the end of my visit to the Sunruta Kingdom, Daniel gave me a puzzle box to take home. It had a hidden layer that wasn’t apparent from looking at it from the outside. I’d found a letter inside.

“Yes, I opened it. But I didn’t understand the meaning of your letter. It was something like... *‘No one can guess a puzzle box’s contents from the outside. That’s what makes them an enigma. Beware the Witch of the South. I look forward to seeing you again.’* What’d you mean by that?”

Daniel gazed at me for a moment before returning his gaze to the ocean.

“Your Royal Magician...this fellow Edoile. He can change his appearance using magic. He showed us, remember? Well, the thing is...I met someone before. Someone who can do the same thing.”

I frowned.

Ed’s Illusion magic was the result of years of research. There was no one alive today who could use that spell except him.

“Sorry to be rude, but you must be mistaken, Prince Daniel. Only Ed can use that spell. Just who was it that you saw using it?”

“It was the Witch of the South. I saw her use it. In my dream.”

“...Your *dream*?”

I stared at Daniel in disbelief.

He saw it in a dream! A dream of all things!

Daniel seemed to know what I was thinking. He shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

“I’m probably just being paranoid. But it’s this same dream I keep having, over and over. The Witch of the South is in it. And she can change how she looks. It’s almost like the dream is some sort of...” Daniel trailed off. “You must think I’m crazy.”

“No...”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I settled for not saying anything.

I mean, what he was saying *did* sound crazy. He was worrying over a dream. Did he think it was some sort of premonition or something?

But Daniel’s expression was very serious, and I could tell that he really *was* genuinely troubled by his dream. I just wasn’t sure how to react.

Daniel noticed me staring at him and balled his fists. Then he raised his head again, looking like his old self, as if his concern had returned to some other corner of his mind.

“It’s the ball tonight. We both have to get ready. Shall we head inside?”

“Yes, of course.”

Daniel held out his hand for me to take.

“I wonder if I could pre-book a dance with you tonight?”

“*Hehe*, I think that could be arranged.”

Then we started off across the garden, Daniel escorting me by the hand.

The white walls of the palace ahead of us were already cast in pink and orange tones from the light of the setting sun.



THE King of Nigren put on an elaborate ball to welcome us.

I was awed by the crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, reflecting

flecks of light around the ballroom. The orchestra was playing some lively music and everyone was chatting, laughing, and having a good time.

“Princess Annabel.”

I turned to see Harold.

“Prince Harold. Thank you for making some time for us and accommodating our request.”

“Ah, not at all. After all, it was I who originally asked this favor of you.” Harold smiled, then leaned in to speak right into my ear, so no one would overhear. “Karina will be arriving any moment. I’ve already warned the guards, so don’t worry.”

“Understood.”

I nodded, pulled my notebook from my dress bag, and began scribbling a quick note. Then I sent it to Ed using my magic.

The request I’d made of Harold was to give us time to treat Elena without Karina’s presence. Harold set everything up so we could use this pocket of time during which Karina was due to make her appearance at the ball.

“Amazing! You use magic as easily as breathing. It makes me feel like even I could master it.”

Harold looked at me with admiration and envy in his eyes, his voice tinged with excitement.

I remember agonizing over why others could use magic so easily when I couldn’t.

“Our country is working on creating Magic Sigils, which will allow even non-magical folk to use magic. If we succeed, you’ll be able to use magic too, Harold.”

“Seriously? Wow! I’ll be looking forward to that!”

Harold’s eyes were sparkling.

Ed’s research would open the door for people like Harold, who wanted to use magic but didn’t have the natural aptitude for it. If the research succeeded, it’d

be an invention great enough to change the world.

I wonder how far along the research has gotten?

Whenever the topic came up, Ed's expression told me that things weren't proceeding as fast as he'd hoped. If Ed couldn't get results in the next year and a half, I'd end up married off to the highest political bidder...

And my future husband might even end up being...

My eyes located Daniel, smiling an easy smile and laughing with a young woman from an aristocratic Nigrenian family.

Just then, I felt a magical disturbance in the air.

Something flashed before my eyes and a sheaf of paper came floating down. It was Ed's response.

I snatched the paper out of the air and scanned it.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

Harold leaned in to read too, alerted by my surprised yelp.

"Karina's come by?" Harold's voice went up an octave in shock.

Apparently, Karina had come to Ed's room that afternoon, asking him to show her the magic she hadn't gotten to see this morning.

"What should we do?"

Harold looked at the clock on the wall.

"There's only half an hour left until the rest of the royal family is scheduled to make their official appearance. Karina should arrive before then. But probably not too much before. Recently, Karina doesn't seem to want to attend balls and so on. She'll probably just put in a brief appearance before returning to her room. If we're going to move, we'd better do it now."

"Understood."

I nodded, scribbling furiously on my notepad.

I told Ed to leave Karina to Toll and go directly to Elena's room.

Then I sent the letter magically again. The reply came quickly. It just said: *Roger that.*

“It looks like the situation is handled.”

“I see; that’s good.” Harold breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, then, how about a dance?”

“I’d love to.”

I took Harold’s hand with a smile and we went out onto the dance floor.

The ball had only just begun.

After I finished dancing with Harold, I was asked to dance by a succession of Nigren politicians and various members of the aristocracy. The ball was lively and everyone seemed to be having fun.

I checked the clock on the wall. It was five minutes before the Nigren royal family was due to make their official appearance.

Karina’s still not here yet?

I looked around the ballroom. I couldn’t see Karina anywhere.

“Princess Annabel.”

It was Daniel speaking to me as I glanced around the ballroom. He was wearing a dark blue frock coat with intricate navy embroidery. *An outfit fit for a prince.*

“Prince Daniel.”

We made eye contact and I smiled as Daniel walked over. The young ladies he’d just been speaking to all frowned with dissatisfaction.

“It looks like those ladies weren’t done talking with you yet, my prince.”

“Unfortunately for them, I only want to talk to you, Princess Annabel.”

Daniel grinned and took my hand, kissing the back of it. I could feel jealous eyes on me and I shivered.

Then the music stopped to signal the appearance of the king himself.

He stood on the high stage and gave a brief speech about the importance of

friendship between Nigren, Najir, and the Sunruta Kingdom.

After that, the orchestra started playing their beautiful music again.

“Princess Annabel, would you honor me with a dance?”

“Prince Daniel!”

Daniel was interrupted by a loud shout.

We looked over to see Karina, who’d appeared all of a sudden, looking very beautiful.

She wore a yellow dress that showcased her fiery red hair and was adorned with flowers. Her neck and earlobes sparkled with fat, shiny diamonds.

“Princess Karina. You’re late. We were wondering what had become of you.”

At first, Daniel seemed taken aback by Karina’s abrupt intrusion but soon regained his signature smile.

“I was busy getting ready. But here I am.”

Karina didn’t seem to notice the change in Daniel’s expression at all. She grasped her dress and curtsied, her eyes fixed on him like a predator setting its sights on prey.

Daniel shot me a concerned look, but I gave a small nod and took a gracious step back.

“Princess Karina, would you care for a dance?”

“Certainly. I’d love to.”

Smiling, Karina’s gaze flickered to me for just a second. I thought I saw a glint of triumph in that look, and I was struck speechless.

Is Karina in love with Daniel?

Thinking back, I remember hearing that Karina had been the one to strongly push for a marriage between herself and Daniel for the political benefit of both Nigren and the Sunruta Kingdom.

I watched them as they headed out onto the dance floor.

“Princess Annabel. Do you think the Princess Karina you met yesterday is really

the same Karina that we know?"

Daniel's question was on my mind again. *Her expression just then...it was just like the one worn by the other Karina, from my old world...*

Why did she change all of a sudden?

What could have prompted this?

She'd been her usual warm self when she visited Najir. But after that, things started getting weird with her letters. So, it must've been going on these past few months. This would coincide with when Elena first got sick and around when Karina's Magic Crystal broke. Perhaps that was the reason, then?

I wonder if Ed managed to heal Elena?

If Elena got well again, perhaps Karina would go back to being her usual kind, friendly self.

I watched Karina and Daniel dancing. After the song finished, they headed over to greet the king. I pulled my notebook out of my bag again and scribbled a quick note to Ed asking for updates.

"It's worse than I thought. I need more time."

That was all he said, but I could picture his expression as he wrote the words.

Who cast a spell on Elena, though? And for what purpose?

If an elite magician like Ed could examine Elena and determine that she was under a spell, then there was no mistake in my mind. The only question was... why?

Maybe Elena herself wasn't the target? Maybe it was someone wanting to hurt Karina?

As I was mulling it all over, I heard someone say "Princess Annabel" from behind me.

"Are you all right? You're staring into space. If you're not feeling well, perhaps you should return to your room?"

It was Daniel back again, looking concerned.

"Prince Daniel. Where's Karina?"

“Oh, she went back to her room. She said she doesn’t really care for parties like this...”

“What?!”

Harold had said that Karina would probably return to her room as soon as she could, but I had no idea it would be this soon!

If she returned to her room now, she would bump right into Ed, who was currently examining Elena. I looked frantically over to the doors to see a woman who looked like Karina leaving through them. I quickly sent a note to Ed that said *“She’s coming back! You need to leave now!”* Then I chased after Karina.

“Princess Karina!”

I ran down the hallway after her, calling her name. Karina stopped and turned to face me.

“...Princess Annabel? What is it?”

“I’ve been wanting to give you this!”

I pulled out the box I’d put in my party bag, determined to give it to Karina tonight. Inside was the hair accessory with the Magic Crystal in it that I’d gotten for Karina as a replacement gift.

“What’s this?”

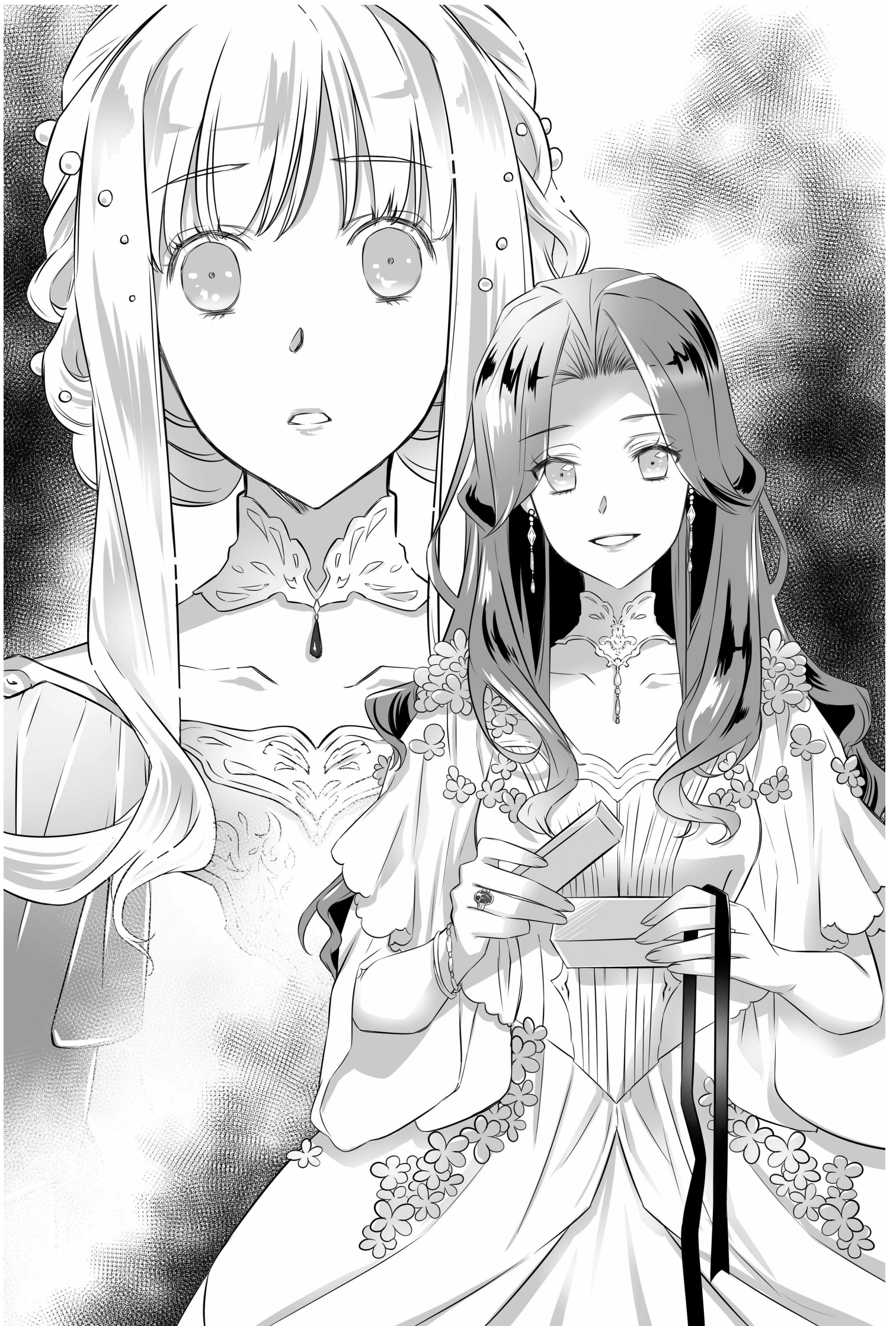
“A gift from Najir. Remember how sad you were when the one you got in Najir ended up breaking? Well, I got you the same one to replace it!”

Karina untied the ribbon and opened the box.

Looking inside, she smiled a perfectly polished smile.

“Oh, the hair accessory, of course! Yes, I *was* so sad to lose the last one. Thank you.”

I stared at her in surprise.



It wasn't a hair accessory Karina had last time; it was a necklace. She'd actually picked it herself. When she wrote to say the stone had broken, I'd decided to give her the same stone again, but in a hair accessory this time.

"I'll treasure it. Well, good night."

"...Good night."

I watched Karina turn and head off to her room.

"Who...Who *was* that?"

My whisper sounded faint in the vastness of the palace hallway.

Karina didn't seem to have simply forgotten. It was almost like...

"No one can guess a puzzle box's contents from the outside. That's what makes them an enigma. Beware the Witch of the South."

Daniel's words replayed in my mind.

The Witch of the South...who could change her appearance at will.

No, it wasn't possible...Ed was the only magician in the world who could do that.

But I couldn't stop the wave of terror from washing over me.

My mind was awlirl with horrible doubts.

But I still had no idea what was really going on.

She was Karina...but she wasn't Karina at all. And it was just like when Daniel had been Daniel...and yet not Daniel in my last timeline. Things were starting to take an oddly familiar turn.

I didn't know what to do...but I decided to hurry to see Ed to ask him about Elena's condition for now.

I headed straight to Ed's room and knocked on the door. Quietly, it opened.

"Ah, Princess. I just got back. I narrowly managed to evade Karina. Thanks for the heads-up." Ed looked deeply troubled as he answered the door, speaking low and fast.

"Ed, what happened to Elena?"

From the look on Ed's face, it was obvious he hadn't been able to help her. I was filled with anxiety as I looked at him.

"Come in first, Princess." Ed moved back, gesturing inside the room. I nodded, ducking inside.

"So...what happened?"

I sat down and got straight to the point, aware that time was short. Ed sat down on the opposite side of the low table, facing me. His expression was grim.

"I was only with her for half an hour, but I *was* able to fully examine Elena. She seemed surprised to see me at first but relaxed when I assured her I was there with Harold's full consent. She even shed a tear... Now, as to her ailment... it's clear to me that she is indeed under magical influence."

Ed paused, as if unsure how to proceed. Lacing his fingers together, he gazed at the wall.

"Based on my intuition, it appears that she's under the influence of several spells at once. One is a silencing spell, which prevents her from speaking or even writing certain things. It's an extremely complex spell. Another spell keeps her from leaving the room on her own..."

"She's under *that* many spells? Were you able to lift them?"

"No. The examination took longer than I expected. It took me the whole time just to determine what spells she was under. I worried that the culprit might pick up on what I'd done if I lifted the spells incorrectly. Then they'd just cast an even more powerful spell next time."

Ed paused, biting his lip.

"It seems impossible, but...it is my belief that Elena is under the influence of an Illusion."

"...It can't be!" My voice rose in shock. "But...*you're* the only magician who can cast Illusions. I mean, I know the other Najirian Royal Magicians have recently been able to cast temporary Illusions on small objects thanks to your instruction, but..."

Illusion magic had been pioneered by the legendary magician, Longile. It was

his life's work. The technique was very old indeed and incomplete. But once Ed became a Royal Magician, he was able to pick up the research and continue it until he could cast incredible Illusions himself.

It was impossible to imagine any magician who wasn't from Najir being able to do it.

"I thought so too. But there's no mistake. I know an Illusion when I see it. But this Illusion spell Elena is under...it shows signs of the technique that I developed."

Ed shook his head, his face very solemn indeed.

"Anyway, from the amount of complicated magical spells Elena is currently under, it's clear to me that the woman in that room who appears to be Elena isn't actually her."

"Is it really her...the Princess Karina we knew?"

Daniel's words came back to me as I reeled back in my seat.

That's what Daniel had asked me, back in the garden gazebo.

"No one can guess a puzzle box's contents from the outside..." I murmured.

"What's that?" Ed gave me a confused look, but I couldn't meet his gaze. My mind was ablaze with rapid thinking.

Daniel said he saw the Witch of the South use Illusion magic in his dream.

I dismissed him at the time, thinking it was impossible. But what if it were true?

If the Witch of the South could change her appearance, then that'd mean that the woman who looked like Elena wasn't Elena. It was the witch herself.

But Ed had said that Elena was "under magical influence." Magic that someone else had cast upon her. In other words, she wasn't doing it to herself.

"Could that mean..."

I thought back on the unsettling encounter I had just before.

Karina, now acting like a completely different person, didn't know about one of the precious memories we had made together in Najir.

“Could that mean that the ‘Witch of the South’ is...Karina?”

“Princess. Who is this ‘Witch of the South?’”

Picking up on my mutterings, Ed looked at me with an expression of deep concern.

I clenched my fists as they lay on my lap.

I’d been dismissing it until now, thinking it all too absurd. But if Karina wasn’t really who she appeared to be, then all of the weirdness that’d been surrounding her would make sense. She didn’t seem like Karina at all. So... perhaps she *wasn’t*. After all, what had led to my current life should have been impossible, and yet here I was.

But then...where’s the real Karina?

That’s when I gasped.

Someone was casting magic on Elena.

Around the same time that Elena fell sick, Karina’s personality completely changed.

Which must mean...

“Elena was behind everything...she switched places!”

When we met for the second time here in Nigren, Elena had seemed so uncharacteristically happy to see me. She’d shed tears, as if desperate to tell me something.

She wanted me to realize that she wasn’t Elena at all, but really Karina herself...

Across the table, Ed rubbed his furrowed brow.

“You’re saying...Elena is behind this?”

He fell silent for a few moments, thinking over my hypothesis. Then he muttered, “*Hmm.*”

“...So, your theory is that Elena and Princess Karina have switched places? But when they visited Najir, Elena seemed most surprised and impressed by my Illusion demonstration. It didn’t seem at all like a magical technique she had

already mastered.”

“You’re right. But...” I thought back to something that happened a while back.
“But...when Elena came to Najir...”

The break-in happened.

Someone had stolen Classified Books from the library’s classified section. And they’d disguised themselves to look like Ed while they did so.

Was that Elena too, using Illusion to mimic Ed’s form?

But Ed shook his head.

“Certainly, everything would make sense if Elena could use Illusion magic. But the stolen books were returned within hours. This means someone would’ve had to break through the magical shield placed on the library and use Transference magic to put them back. Back in Najir, Elena simply didn’t *have* the magical ability to do any of that. Nor did she have the ability to use Illusion magic.”

Ed was right. Only it’d make such perfect sense if Elena was behind everything. I crossed my arms, thinking hard.

“Speaking of which...”

It was the first time I met Karina.

“She’s amazing. She can replicate any spell, just by watching it being cast once!”

During my visit to the Sunruta Kingdom, I’d visited their Magical Research Lab with Karina. And I vividly remembered her saying this about her friend Elena, the skilled magician who she’d left behind in Nigren.

“Just by seeing it *once*? If that’s true, that’d make her what we call an Eidetic Magician...someone who can replicate any spell after seeing it only once. The literature says that several such magicians have existed over the centuries. But I’ve never seen one in real life. She must be the only one alive in the world now.”

Ed’s eyes were wide with genuine shock.

We'd learned about Eidetic Magicians at Grail Academy. People with this ability were able to reproduce spells from memory with perfect accuracy after seeing them performed. It was an incredibly rare skill, possessed by only the most gifted magicians of their age. There were rumors Longile himself was one.

"If she really *is* an Eidetic Magician, then she'll be able to use any of the magical techniques she saw while she was in our country. Every Eidetic Magician known to us has been an absolute genius. Even worse, she'd be able to comprehend and execute spells that are recorded in our Classified Books, as well..."

"No! Not the classified magic as well!"

I shuddered in fear.

That'd mean the Witch would be able to use magic that I could only dream of. Magic that even Ed couldn't conjure.

I fell silent again, thinking hard.

The current "Karina" was so very horribly similar to the nasty Karina I remembered from my old timeline.

And Daniel said he saw the Witch of the South use Illusion magic in a dream...

What if it wasn't a dream?

What if Daniel, too, remembered the world of our old timeline?

I have to talk to Daniel. Right now!

I leaped to my feet, looking down at Ed.

If Daniel really did have his memories of the old world, it might not be the best idea for me to turn to him for help in *this* world. But right now, he was the only one who could possibly help me.

"Ed, I need to see Daniel right away! Please accompany me."

Daniel was probably still dancing at the ball.

Ed saw the urgency on my face and nodded, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Certainly, Princess. I will go with you."

Ed stood up, holding his hand out to escort me.

As we approached the ballroom, we could hear lively music and animated voices from within. I peeked in through the door, and that's when I noticed a man rapidly approaching me.

"Princess Annabel! I wondered where you'd gone!"

It was Claude, looking very upset indeed.

Apparently, he'd been busy networking with the foreign dignitaries when he suddenly realized I was missing and became quite panicked.

"Claude, I'm really sorry! But more importantly, have you seen Prince Harold and Prince Daniel?"

"Prince Harold and Prince Daniel? Yes, I saw them just over there, chatting."

Claude pointed. Yes, Daniel was having an animated discussion with Harold in a corner of the ballroom.

"Ed, could you wait here a moment?"

"Certainly."

Dressed in casual clothes as he was, I couldn't bring Ed into the ballroom with me. It'd be very rude to the Nigren royal family, who'd put on such a lavish party. I left Ed by the door and hurried over to Daniel and Harold.

As I drew nearer, they both noticed me and stopped their conversation, smiling at me.

"Prince Harold, may I have a word? I have one of my country's magicians waiting in the hallway."

Harold looked over my shoulder toward the doorway, spotting Ed in his black magician's cape. Immediately, he knew that we wanted to discuss Elena's condition with him.

"All right. Let's talk in a separate room." Nodding, Harold turned to Daniel. "I'd like you to consider what we just discussed. But right now, I'm afraid I need to have a private talk with Princess Annabel..."

"Oh, about that..." Knowing I was being terribly rude, I nonetheless

interrupted Harold while he was still talking. “I want Prince Daniel to join the discussion as well.”

“You want Prince Daniel too?”

Prince Harold looked confused, as if he wasn’t sure what I was trying to do.

“I need Prince Daniel’s help. Please!”

According to Ed, we knew for sure that “Elena” was under several spells and that there was a high possibility she wasn’t *really* Elena at all. In order to figure out what was really going on, I wanted to discuss everything with Daniel and, if possible, find out more about these dreams he’d been having.

Prince Harold looked slightly perturbed but nonetheless seemed to realize from my solemn tone and expression that this was necessary.

“All right. Prince Daniel, will you join us?”

“Certainly.”

Daniel nodded, smiling his usual easy smile.



PRINCE Harold arranged for us to use a room close to the ballroom.

It seemed to be mainly used for welcoming palace guests. In the center of the large room was an expensive-looking rug, upon which sat a long, low table surrounded by sofas.

We sat down, Ed and I on one side and Harold and Daniel on the other.

Ed immediately began telling them what he’d discovered while examining “Elena.”

“So, to summarize, I’m certain that Miss Elena is currently under the influence of several kinds of magic. Furthermore, there’s a high possibility that she is not truly Miss Elena at all.”

Harold had been listening quietly to Ed’s story, but now he frowned and muttered, “Hmm” in a low voice. “So then, who *is* this ‘Miss Elena?’”

Ed looked at me.

My hypothesis—that Elena and Karina had switched places—was an extreme one. I understood Ed’s hesitance to voice it himself, in his position as a magician who’d only briefly examined the patient.

So, I spoke instead.

“It’s my belief that the ‘Miss Elena’ in that room upstairs is actually Princess Karina.”

“...What?” Harold’s jaw dropped. “That’s an *insane* notion! So then, who’s the woman who looks like Karina?!”

“I believe that’s the real Miss Elena.”

I answered as firmly as I could. Harold opened and closed his mouth a few times, seemingly at a loss for words. Beside him, Daniel, who’d kept quiet through all this, also frowned grimly.

The silence went on for what seemed like ages.

“It’s true that Karina hasn’t been herself at all these past few months. She’s been like a different person, in fact. But it’s all so out there! I can’t just jump on board with your outlandish theory so easily, Princess Annabel. Do you have any sort of proof?”

When Harold spoke again, he seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. It was almost like he was trying very hard to keep himself calm.

“Um, well...”

Now it was *my* turn to be tongue-tied.

Ed and my thoughts on all of this were based on the results of Ed’s examination of “Elena.”

I’d known Ed for years, so I was certain he’d never lie about something like this. But to Prince Harold, Ed was nothing more than a foreign magician. There was always the chance this was some elaborate ruse we were up to in an attempt to cause panic and uproar for the land of Nigren.

“In *that* case...”

Daniel finally stepped in and spoke for me when I could not.

“...In *that* case, I propose that I take Princess Karina away from the palace tomorrow for a whole day, on the pretext of seeing the sights of Nigren. You were just saying that you want me to seriously consider moving forward with Karina, Harold, so that should be fine with you, shouldn’t it? Then, while we’re away, Princess Annabel and Royal Magician Edoile can attempt to lift the spell cast upon “Elena,” in order to prove their hypothesis directly to you. What do you say to that?”

Now it was clear what Harold and Daniel had been so animatedly discussing back in the ballroom. Harold was trying to press Daniel into seriously considering an engagement to Karina, to marry her into the Sunruta Kingdom’s royal family. But Daniel was pushing back, claiming that he wanted to marry me instead...

Still, Daniel’s offer to keep Karina away from the palace was a godsend.

“Karina” would never let us close enough to “Elena” to properly examine her and hopefully lift the spells. And we were running out of time—I was due to return to Najir the day after tomorrow.

In other words, we’d only one day left. If Daniel could keep “Karina” busy for an entire day, that’d really help us out.

Prince Harold looked at Daniel solemnly for a moment before nodding.

“All right. Princess Annabel, can you lift these spells during that time?”

I glanced at Ed. He nodded silently.

“We’ll try. Tomorrow, our magician will pay another visit to ‘Elena.’”

Trying wasn’t going to be good enough. We needed to lift those spells tomorrow, or all would be lost.

Still, I nodded firmly, confident as ever in my Ed.

10. Breaking the Spells

AFTER we finished talking, Prince Harold returned to the ballroom. Daniel watched him go, then turned to look at both Ed and me.

“Princess Annabel and Royal Magician Edoile...may I have a moment?”

“Of course.” I nodded.

That’s why I’d asked Daniel to join us.

Just like how I’d wanted to speak to him, I’d also predicted that he would want to talk to me.

Daniel looked around to make sure no one was nearby, then beckoned me closer.

“What you said about them switching places...are you sure about that?”

“That’s what we think, but we don’t have any proof. But after examining her, Ed is confident that Elena is currently under the influence of several spells.”

I turned to look at Ed. He nodded slightly. “I’m certain of it,” he said.

“It took quite some time to identify the spells...they’re very complex...but I believe she’s under an Illusion, a Silencing spell, and others. And the spells need to be recast at regular periods to prevent them from wearing off.”

“I see...is it possible that Elena has cast the spells upon herself?”

“No, I believe the spells were cast upon her by someone else. She didn’t do it to herself.”

“Then...what about Princess Karina?”

“I haven’t been able to analyze Princess Karina, so I cannot say. All I can say is that there are strong signs Princess Karina is behind this.”

“I wonder if that’s true...”

Daniel fell silent then, gazing somberly at the ground. I cleared my throat hesitantly.

“Prince Daniel, could you tell me more about this ‘Witch of the South’ you mentioned this afternoon?”

“The Witch of the South...”

Daniel lifted his head. Gazing at me, he frowned wryly.

“I don’t even know who the Witch of the South is myself.”

“You *don’t*? But you said she can change her appearance.”

I raised an eyebrow at Daniel.

If he knew her from a dream, then shouldn’t he know who she really is?

“To be honest, all I know is that I dreamed of a woman called ‘the Witch of the South,’ who could change her appearance. But I don’t know who the witch is.”

“Then, ‘the Witch of the South’ is just what you call her?”

“No, no. You two told me that was what she was called.”

“‘You two?’”

“Yes, you and Royal Magician Edoile.”

“Ed and I told you that?” I was shocked.

What Daniel was saying was very unexpected.

I completely thought that Daniel’s dreams were just fragmented memories of the old world. The one we’d both lived in.

But I’d never once mentioned the words “Witch of the South” in the old timeline; of that, I was sure. And I was positive Ed hadn’t, either. So the world of Daniel’s dreams had to be completely different from the world I had come from.

“Yes. The first time I met the Witch of the South, she looked like Karina. But then she changed into someone else entirely.”

“And it *wasn’t* Elena?”

“No. At least from what I’ve seen in my dreams, she’s never looked like Elena.”

“I see...”

What could it all mean?

Someone assuming Karina’s form had happened in whatever world was tied to Daniel’s dreams. But apparently, the Witch’s true identity wasn’t Elena at all...

Daniel watched me as I mulled it over. Then he closed his eyes as if thinking hard, pressing his palm to his forehead as he did.

“The Witch of the South...the woman I met for the first time, in the form of Karina... It’s like my memories are covered by fog... I’m not even sure what I saw for real anymore. I think you call it...Mesmerizing magic? Anyway, it made me stop caring about anything. Made me want to pledge my life to her...”

“Mesmerizing magic...”

Mesmerizing magic was something many researchers had worked on over the years. But in the end, the research was abandoned. It was a kind of magic that involved casting a hallucinogenic effect to control people’s feelings and memories.

I wasn’t sure if it really *was* Mesmerizing magic based off what Daniel said, but it seemed clear that it was some sort of memory-disrupting magic.

“Is *that* why you set up your country’s Magical Research Laboratory and started researching defensive magic? To defend against the Witch of the South?”

“.....”

Daniel was silent for a moment before nodding. “Yes, exactly,” he said. “The Witch of the South emerged and changed the entire world. I lost everything I’d been building in the blink of an eye.”

Daniel’s voice was suddenly very quiet and small. His ice-blue eyes shimmered with emotion.

Thinking back to when I first met Karina in the Sunruta Kingdom...Daniel had

been wearing protective magical bracelets. And now, too, he was wearing cufflinks and a ring with magical protection properties. This seemed to be some sort of personal self-defense system.

“What happened to the Witch of the South after that?”

“I don’t know.” Daniel smiled sadly. “I’ve no way of knowing.”

His expression was so filled with pain, I knew I couldn’t press him any further. It was clear that Daniel had suffered terribly. *What did he lose...in that other world that I don’t know?*

Then Daniel sighed and turned to Ed. “Edoile...my magical researchers tell me that as long as I keep myself equipped with protective talismans, I’ll be protected from harm. Is that true?”

“Yes. If someone tries to harm you, the talismans will block the magic. However, if you’re attacked by someone with greater magical power than that of your talismans, they’ll be canceled out and will cease to be effective.”

“Is there any way to tell if something like that is happening?”

“Well...” Ed thought hard before speaking slowly again. “When the magical power contained within the Magic Crystals of your protective items expires trying to protect you, the crystals themselves will break.”

“I see. I’ll bear that in mind.” Daniel rubbed the ring on his right hand, which contained a large Magic Crystal. Silently, he gazed down at it. “If I... If I should...”

“Yes?”

Daniel swallowed, a stricken expression on his face.

“If I should ever try to *hurt* Princess Annabel, I want you to swear you’ll stop me, Edoile.”

Daniel lifted his head and looked straight into Ed’s eyes, a desperate plea glinting in his own.

Ed frowned a little, as if not fully understanding. But Daniel kept staring at him until finally, he nodded and agreed.



THE next morning was refreshingly sunny, the perfect weather for going on an outing.

I looked out at the blue ocean from my guest room's window. It was glittering under the sunshine. Above the blue sea, I could see seagulls flying and diving in the distance.

"Enjoy yourself in town today, Ellie!"

"I will! But are you really sure it's all right for me to go?"

"Of course! Prince Harold will see that I'm taken care of. Don't you worry!"

"Well, I *do* hope you'll be all right..." Ellie was frowning with concern.

Today, we were going to try to break the spells placed upon "Elena." Ed, Toll, and I were all going to attempt it together.

According to the letter that'd come from Prince Harold first thing this morning, Karina was due to go on her outing with Daniel straight after breakfast. It was unlikely she'd be taking Elena with her, bedridden as she was. We were going to use this chance to break the spells in her room.

Since we'd be spending a long period of time in Karina's room, suspicions would probably be raised among the staff. To fix that, Prince Harold had arranged for the staff, including my ladies' maid, Ellie, to be taken into town for a private tour.

After I said goodbye to Ellie and the other servants, Ed and Toll came by my room. Then, with the valet Prince Harold had assigned to us, we headed to Karina's bedroom.

"I've posted some of my guards outside, and you are free to place your own guards outside the doors as well. If for some reason, Karina comes back early, you'll be alerted immediately."

"Understood. Thank you for arranging all of this."

I thanked Prince Harold outside Karina's door then placed my bodyguard, Hendrick, on duty. Finally, I headed inside the room itself.

The air felt oppressive.

It was the same heavy feeling I'd noticed last time. It felt like the room was draped in a heavy, thick, yet invisible cloth. It must've been the result of the spell Ed said was cast to prevent Elena from leaving the room on her own.

"Hello, Elena," I called out softly so as not to alarm her. But there was no response from within. "Elena? Are you in here?"

I stepped tentatively inside. In the center of the large room was Karina's bed, covered by a canopy. There was a twin bed against the wall, as well. Noticing the figure lying in bed, I crept over.

"Is she asleep?"

Ed passed me, drawing closer to Elena's bedside, where he crouched down to examine her. Then he placed his hand on her forehead.

"Yes, she's deep asleep."

Ed looked at me, nodding. I put my hand on Elena's shoulder. I tried shaking her gently. But she showed no signs of waking.

"That's not good. Should we cast a Waking spell?" I asked.

"She's under the influence of so many spells already, which we still need to lift. We can't cast any more on her." Ed gently removed my hand from her shoulder.

"Can we lift the spells if she's asleep?"

I wasn't expecting her to be in such a deep sleep when we came. I looked to Ed for a solution.

"It's possible..."

"Then let's get to it."

We didn't have time to wait for her to wake up. Time was slipping through our fingers with every second.

Ed checked the time. It was around ten in the morning.

"They said they'd be out all day. But I think the soonest we can expect them back is around three in the afternoon. I want to be done before then at the latest. I'll work on lifting the spells placed on Elena. Toll, you work on lifting the

spells placed on the room. Princess, help Toll with whatever you can.”

“Understood.”

“Okay.”

Toll and I both nodded. Then we all got to work.

I don’t know how long we were at it. We worked tirelessly, only stopping to wolf down the light lunch Prince Harold had sent up to us.

With the breaking of every spell, there was a zinging sound, and the air in the room shimmered.

While Ed was busy with Elena, I helped Toll lift the magic spells on the room. I thought we’d be done in no time, but it was taking far longer than I could have imagined.

“Next is the Soundproofing spell.”

“I thought we just *did* that one?”

“This spell was cast twice.”

“.....”

Just how many spells are in place here?

How could one person cast all these spells? And manage to keep them active? The thought was terrifying.

Born in a magical place like Najir, I was blessed with magical powers on par with the Royal Magicians. But even *I* couldn’t begin to imagine the power and strength it’d take to keep *this* many spells in play at once.

“Ah, I think this next one might be the last one...”

“Really?”

Toll breathed a sigh of relief and my spirits lifted. Neither of us had spoken of it, but I knew we were both worried that we wouldn’t be able to finish in time, even while splitting the workload between us.

“Ed, we’re almost done! How’s it going with you?” I called out to Ed, who was sitting by Elena’s bedside.

Elena still hadn't woken. It was like she was under a Sleeping spell.

"She's been asleep for so long. Is she under a Sleeping spell?" Toll voiced my very same concerns. Now he joined me, leaning over to peer at Elena as she slept.

"That's what I thought at first, but I don't sense any Sleeping spell." Ed shook his head then returned his attention to Elena. "But I *do* sense an unusual spell, one I've never experienced before. What could it be? I thought it'd become clearer if I lifted the other spells, but I still can't identify it. If I can lift it and the Illusion, then it *should* be all done..."

Ed's face was clouded with concern. It was clear he wasn't sure how best to approach this new, mysterious form of magic.

"I'll come over and help you once we're done, then."

"Thanks."

Toll went back to work lifting the final spell cast over the whole room. There was another zinging sound, and the air in the room shimmered again.

"It's lifted... Huh?" Toll frowned as the final spell lifted. "There's something still here. I feel it. Did I fail to properly lift one of the spells...?"

Toll looked confused and began murmuring the incantation again.

"Lift, Spell."

Just then, the heavy air in the room seemed to instantly clear.

"There, that seems to have done it."

"Good."

I returned my attention to Ed and Elena.

"Ed...how's it going?"

Ed was frowning somberly down at the woman in the bed. She'd snow-white skin and luscious red hair. Her closed eyes were fringed with long lashes.

I gasped as I gazed at her.

"Karina..."

Elena had returned to her true form as soon as Ed lifted the Illusion placed upon her. It *was* Karina all along! Only...she looked thinner than I remembered. And she remained fast asleep.

“Ed, let me help.” Toll immediately moved over to Ed’s side. “So it really *was* Princess Karina all along...” he mumbled to himself, looking downcast. Then he shook his head and placed a hand on her forehead to check her status.

“I can’t identify the final spell. What do you think, Toll?”

Ed stepped to one side and scrutinized Toll as we all waited.

I peeked past them both to see Karina, still sleeping away soundly.

Then Toll muttered, “Huh?”

Ed and I both instantly knew that something odd was going on.

“What is it, Toll?”

Karina’s long black lashes fluttered. It looked like she was regaining consciousness.

“*Mm...*”

“Karina!” I quickly leaned in closer to see her.

Karina’s eyes opened, and she looked blearily around the room before focusing on me. Then she blinked, as if confused.

“Karina! It’s me, Bel! Remember?”

“...Uh, sorry...who are you?”

“What...?”

I was struck dumb by her unexpected answer. But Karina continued to gaze around the room.

“What am I doing sleeping over *here*? Oh, my head feels so fuzzy.” Karina covered her mouth and yawned, then stretched. “Are you my new maid? Hello!”

Karina smiled innocently up at me. She was speaking almost in the manner of a child...

Toll was still frowning.

“Princess Annabel, I think Karina is possibly...”

But just as he was speaking, there was a flash of light behind him.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

The voice sounded as sharp and cutting as a knife’s blade. It sliced right through the air, chilling us all. Struck dumb by fear, we all turned to face the speaker.

“Is it customary to intrude into people’s private chambers in Najir?”

“You...”

“And you brought your magicians with you? What are you trying to do?”

I was frozen in terror as I gazed at the woman wearing Karina’s face, glaring at us all with an icy stare. Fortunately, Ed and Toll blocked her view of the real Karina on the bed.

What are you doing here?!

That’s what I wanted to ask, but I was too terrified to speak.

But I’d placed Hendrick outside to guard the room. Hendrick was loyal and serious to a fault. He’d never have left his post without my permission.

And what about Prince Harold’s guards, who were also keeping lookout? No one could pass by without their express permission...

But then it came to me.

Of course... The door was never opened.

This room was placed under several protective magic spells.

The last spell that Toll lifted was a shield designed to prevent Transference magic. I assumed it was to prevent anyone from escaping the room, but it’d also prevent anyone from teleporting in. Until Toll lifted the spell, that is...

How careless of us...

The spell that Toll had picked up on toward the end, the one that was still lingering...must’ve been an Alarm spell!

Fake Karina, picking up on the alarm, must've used teleportation magic to instantly appear directly in the room. As she drew a circle in the air with her finger, I felt cold sweat slide down my back. She looked like a perfect copy of the real Karina.

But those cold eyes...were the same as the ones that'd looked down on me in contempt and mockery back in the old world. I couldn't stay put a second longer. It was *terribly* dangerous to be anywhere near this woman.

"Time to go!" Ed mumbled something under his breath while resting his hand on the real Karina. Toll put a hand on Ed and me before all four of us were consumed in a sudden burst of light.

The last thing I saw was Fake Karina staring in shock as we vanished in front of her.



PRINCE Harold's face was a mask of shock.

"So...so all this time, Karina's been a completely different person? And *she's* the one behind all of it?"

"Yes, as you can see."

"But...maybe this girl you've got with you here is actually someone else, made to look like Karina? Our Nigren magicians don't have the skills to tell the difference..."

"I simply ask that you trust us, Prince Harold."

I looked right into Harold's eyes.

We brought Karina with us when we came to Harold to explain. She sat, gazing around as if fascinated by everything.

She was still acting like a child. Just moments before, she'd pointed at Harold and said: "We have the same color hair! Tee hee!"

"Why is Karina...*like* this?" he asked.

"I think she's under the influence of memory-altering magic. I'm afraid I showed the technique to the Fake Karina yesterday..." Toll hung his head in

shame.

“Can’t you fix her?”

“It’s...it’s still an unfinished technique... I...I don’t know what to say...”

Harold gazed at Karina for a few moments before clutching his temples in anguish.

Karina blinked at him, looking alarmed.

“Are you all right, Harold? Do you feel unwell? You should eat some apples...”

As Karina stared at Harold, his head suddenly jerked up.

There was a commotion in the hallway outside. The guards were talking, and then a high, commanding female voice could be heard ordering them around.

Face stiffening, Harold looked at the door.

“She’s here.”

The door opened with a slam.

“Brother, may I have a word?”

Fake Karina was standing in the doorway all of a sudden, smiling. But her smile didn’t reach her cold eyes.

“When she appeared in the bedroom earlier, she failed to notice Karina because I cast a Concealment spell on her. Without actually investigating the spells I cast, she shouldn’t be able to see nor tell that Fake Elena has reverted to the true Karina.”

Ed leaned in to whisper this in Harold’s ear. I was impressed. To avoid Fake Karina from figuring out we knew everything, he’d cast a quick spell to hide Karina from the Fake’s view and keep us safe for just a little while longer.

Harold nodded, keeping his eyes averted from Ed. He stood, smiling at Fake Karina.

“Karina, you’re back early. And where is Prince Daniel? Weren’t you two off sight-seeing together?”

“He’s right here, of course.” Fake Karina gestured behind her. Daniel was

standing there, expressionless.

When did Daniel get back?

I frowned at Daniel.

Daniel hadn't been in Karina's bedroom when we'd teleported. Karina must have brought him there afterward, using her magic.

"Did you have a nice time, Prince Daniel?"

"Yes. Very nice." Daniel smiled. "It's nice to be welcomed back so warmly," he said.

He looked like his usual self.

Harold nodded. "But aren't you back rather early?"

"Ah, yes. Well, we saw the main sights, and then I started to feel guilty about enjoying myself while poor Elena was so sick."

Fake Karina turned to Daniel, putting her arm through his and smiling at him. "Right, Daniel?" she said. Daniel smiled and nodded as their eyes met.

"By the way, Brother, I noticed Elena wasn't in my room. Have you seen her?"

She had to know that we'd removed the real Karina from the room. And yet, Elena—the Fake Karina—still asked this of Harold. It was almost as if she was trying to test him.

"Oh, Elena actually suddenly got much worse. So I had her moved. It was a good thing that Princess Annabel and her friends were visiting at the time and noticed her deteriorating. I apologize for acting without letting you know what was going on first.

"I see. Well then, where is she?"

"She's resting comfortably. I'll take you to see her later."

"....."

Fake Karina stopped smiling and glared past Harold at us. The next moment, though, her syrupy smile was back.

"By the way, Karina...the carriage isn't back yet. How did you return?"

“Oh, we took a cab. For a change of pace.” Karina answered smoothly, looking up at Daniel through her fluttering lashes. “Right, Daniel?”

“Yes...we took a cab.” Daniel nodded, then pushed his long sleeve up.

Huh?

My gaze went right to Daniel’s wrist.

The protective bracelet Daniel always wore with the Magic Crystal in it...was cracked in several places.

Ed seemed to notice it too. He shot me a sharp glance.

“I see. Well, I hope you at least brought me a souvenir!” Harold said with a big smile.

“A souvenir?”

“Yes, you always bring me my favorite raisins back, don’t you?”

“Oh, of course! Sorry, I didn’t have time this time around.” Karina shrugged.

“That’s all right. It happens.”

Prince Harold smiled and waved dismissively. Then he started across the room. For some reason, he strolled all the way over to the decorative sword mounted on the wall. Picking it up, he turned on Fake Karina, brandishing the sword.

“Who are you?!”

Fake Karina gasped, taking a step back.

“Brother, whatever are you—”

“Don’t ‘Brother’ me! You’ve no right to call me that! What have you done to the real Karina? What have you done to my sister?!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I *hate* raisins! If you were the real Karina, you’d know that! I would never want them for a souvenir!”

Fake Karina cowered against Daniel as Harold waved the sword at her.

“This isn’t funny, Brother!”

“Who’s laughing?” he snarled.

“I simply misspoke.”

“I’ll say!” Prince Harold snorted with derision.

“You’ve got it all wrong! Hasn’t he, Daniel?”

Fake Karina turned to Daniel in panic. He met her gaze, smiling softly. Seeing the smile on his face, Fake Karina seemed relieved. Daniel held her tight against his chest protectively.

“Now, Prince Harold!”

Daniel shouted and Harold jumped. As his guards rushed forward to restrain Fake Karina with their leather belts, there was a flash and an ear-splitting zinging sound.

A gust of strong air shot out all around, with Fake Karina in the center. Shards of ice materialized in the air and flew in every direction.

“Princess, look out!”

Ed shouted, quickly casting a protective wall around me. The ice shards bounced harmlessly off. I covered my ears and closed my eyes.

It all happened in the span of a few seconds.

I looked around me at the aftermath of the attack...

“She’s gone...”

Fake Karina was nowhere to be seen.

“She’s fled!” Prince Harold was yelling, still holding the sword. Debris from the air blast and ice shards made a mess of the room. There were puddles on the floor.

“Princess, are you hurt?”

“I’m okay. But what about Daniel?!”

Daniel had been standing out of range of Ed’s protective spell, in the vicinity of Fake Karina’s blast. Now he was slumped against the wall. Ed hurried over to attend to him.

“Damn it! We almost had her!” As Ed treated his injuries, Daniel coughed and laughed bitterly.

As I watched them, I was thinking hard. Things had gone horribly wrong.

Fake Karina had fled, using teleportation magic.

But that wasn’t the problem. The problem was her power of Illusion. She could’ve transformed into a completely different person. She could be right in front of our eyes, and we wouldn’t even know it was her.

The Witch of the South can change her appearance. That’s what makes her so dangerous...

The full weight of those words finally registered with me and struck terror into my heart.

11. The Witch of the South

WITH the conspiracy of the fake Karina now revealed, Prince Harold mobilized his people to search the palace. But there was no sign of anyone who looked like Karina or Elena.

“She’s probably used magic to flee far away.”

Harold gazed down at the map spread out on the desk before him, writing crosses on the areas his servants had already checked.

“That’s possible. But there are other possibilities, too,” Ed said.

“You’re saying she might still be here in the palace, looking like someone else?” Daniel frowned, perturbed by Ed’s suggestion.

Obviously, our chances of finding Fake Karina were slim to none. A gloomy mood settled over the room. Karina looked around at everyone’s faces, concerned and not comprehending why we were all upset.

“Say, Karina...how much do you remember?” I asked.

“What do you mean? I remember everything.” Karina blinked her green eyes at me in confusion.

I tried asking her more questions, but it was impossible to get anything out of her. Karina didn’t even seem aware that her memories had been altered at all.

According to Toll, incomplete magic could cause aftereffects that lingered on a person. There was a possibility that Karina’s memories would start to come back gradually. But there was also the possibility they never would.

And there was also the possibility that they might snap back all at once.

In other words, we had no idea what would happen.

“Hey, Ed, Toll. You said that the spell cast on Karina was cast repeatedly to prevent it from wearing off, right?”

“Right.”

Ed and Toll stopped their discussion with Harold and Daniel and turned to look at me.

“How often did she recast them, do you think?”

“Magic usually lasts a matter of hours after being cast, before starting to weaken and wear off. I’m not sure how long exactly but based on how thick the magic was on Karina, I’d say the Witch cast the spells once every day.”

“Every day... So, she would have planned to recast them again today, right?”

That’s when Harold leaped to his feet, yelling, “That’s it!”

“You mean there’s a good chance the Witch will come back to find Karina?”

“Yes. I believe so.” I nodded.

When Fake Karina burst in on us earlier, Ed quickly cast Concealment magic, preventing her from noticing the real one. Surely, Fake Karina would have to return soon to check up on the spells she’d cast on the real Karina and redo them if she wanted to keep her secrets.

If my hypothesis was correct, Fake Karina would be returning soon. And she’d head straight to check on the real Karina.

“I’ve created a strong shield around this area, which should prevent both Transportation and Locating spells. But with the Witch’s skills, it’s only a matter of time before she breaks the spells and discovers where Karina really is.”

Ed’s comment caused everyone to fall silent. Nobody disagreed.

“First off, we’re due to return to our own countries tomorrow. I’ve already contacted my people and let them know I wish to extend my stay,” I said. “Toll and Ed should take turns guarding Karina. I’ll stay by her side as well.”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate it if you did that. As for the magic...well, we simply can’t do very much without you and your people, Princess Annabel.”

Prince Harold rubbed his forehead before flopping back down into his chair. Its legs shrieked against the floor.

“I’ll extend my visit, too,” Daniel said. “And I’ll try to stay as close as possible.

The woman who disguised herself as Karina has cause to hate me now. I pretended to be under her spell earlier and betrayed her in front of you all. She might come after me for revenge.”

“Yes, you’re in danger too. You should stay in Karina’s room with the others, Prince Daniel.” Prince Harold nodded.

Then we started making plans to ensure that Karina was heavily guarded around the clock.



I couldn’t sleep after all the excitement.

The room was silent. But I could hear soft breathing beside me.

Tonight, I was sleeping side by side with Karina.

Toll and Ed were in the room guarding us and sleeping in shifts. Daniel and Harold were sleeping in the connecting room.

I wonder what time it is?

I sat up slowly to check the clock. Then as I tried to get out of bed, I heard a soft voice.

“Can’t sleep, Princess?”

I looked over, my eyes already used to the darkness, to see Ed sitting on the sofa and looking my way. Toll was sitting beside him, fast asleep.

“Yes...I don’t feel sleepy.”

I put both feet on the floor and grabbed my gown from the bedside table, sliding it on as I stood.

“It’s almost dawn.”

“Oh.”

I walked over to the window and opened the curtains. The inky sky hinted it’d be chilly today. The glass made my fingertips numb with cold.

“You should sleep,” Ed said softly. “You need your strength. I could cast a Sleeping spell on you. One that’ll wake you in an hour?”

“No thanks, I’m okay.” I shook my head. “I feel like drinking some nice hot tea.”

“The servants should be beginning their rounds around now. Shall I fetch someone?”

“Thank you. That’s very kind.”

“Of course. Just wait here a moment.”

Ed smiled, then shook the sleeping Toll awake to let him know he was stepping out. When Ed opened the door, I could see that the hallway was lit and filled with guards standing at attention.

She didn’t come today, either.

We’d been positive that Fake Karina would come soon, but she still hadn’t shown herself. We had no idea when she would show up, nor what she might look like when she did. Not knowing made me feel sick with unease.

I wish she’d just give up...

Flattening my palm against the glass, I gazed out the window. Just then, I heard the door latch.

I turned around. Ed was just coming back in.

“My, that was quick.”

Ed had only just left, and he hadn’t been gone long at all...only a minute or two. He was holding a tea tray, so he must’ve located a maid in the hallway.

“How’s it looking outside the room?”

“The room’s well-surrounded by guards.”

“Mm. I can see them out in the grounds, too.”

I gazed down from the window. Guards were posted all around the palace, their posts only a few meters apart.

“Karina’s sleeping well.”

“I see.”

I glanced at the sofa, where Toll was asleep once again, still sitting.

It was Toll's turn to sleep, but he'd been awoken to guard me while Ed went to fetch the tea. He must've been really sleepy. As Ed walked over, he peered at Karina's sleeping face. Then he came to join me by the window.

Crack.

I heard the sound of something breaking close by, and I reached up to touch my hair.

I was using the hair accessory from Ed to keep my hair back. I nervously unfastened it and looked at it. There was a big crack right across the red Magic Crystal.

It's broken...

I had only put it on a few moments ago, after getting out of bed. It'd been fine then...

"Why don't you go back to bed, Princess Annabel?"

Ed smiled at me. But I felt a cold shiver run down my spine.

Ed smiled at me in the moonlight, and every last detail of him was the Edoile Licht La Boulacherie that I knew. His suggestion that I return to bed was characteristic of the way he always cared for me.

But something was terribly, terribly wrong.

Ed never, ever calls me "Princess Annabel!"

Panicked, I ran over to the bed to shield Karina as she slept.

That's not Ed!

"Special Protective Magic: Wall."

I cast the strongest spell I knew of and a shield suddenly shimmered into being between me and "Ed."

"Princess Annabel? Is something amiss?"

"Ed" frowned, looking troubled.

I spread my arms wide to try to conceal Karina from view, glaring at the imposter.

“You’re not Ed!!!”

The expression suddenly faded from “Ed’s” face. His eyes narrowed, fixing coldly upon mine. Then, golden particles began to dance in the air around him in a flash of light. “Ed” transformed, morphing into the familiar figure of Elena, right before my eyes.

“How could you tell? And what happened to my precious spells? How *odd*.” Elena narrowed her black eyes further, rubbing her chin. Her partially tied-back black hair fell over her shoulders.

Ed, hurry up!

My heart was hammering.

I may have been able to match Elena’s magic for raw power, but she’d mastered techniques I could never hope to use myself. I needed to call for help before it was too late.

“Elena, *why* are you doing this? I’ll arrange a pardon for you. It’s not too late...”

I hoped to appeal to Elena’s conscience. Elena’s crimes would lead to the death sentence for her. But if I intervened and spoke on her behalf, it was possible Nigren would pardon her.

“Don’t you *dare* call me by that name!!!”



I trembled as the woman shrieked in an ear-splitting voice.

“That royal wench! Can you *believe* what she said to me? ‘*I’ll give you a name.*’ How *dare* she patronize me like that! And you’re just as bad! You’ll ‘arrange a pardon’ for me? You royals are all so stuck-up! You should take long looks at yourselves in the mirror!” Elena was rambling, deeply incensed.

But now I knew that Elena wasn’t the girl’s real name. It was the name Karina had given her when she was brought to the palace as one of Nigren’s rare breed of genetically mutated magicians.

Presumably, the girl had kept her real name to herself.

This girl, who’d come from the mountain ranges to the south...*she* was the Witch of the South.

“Just tell me...why have you done all these terrible things?”

Elena snorted with laughter as I questioned her, my voice trembling.

“Terrible? *They’re* the ones who did terrible things to me first!”

Lifting her hands to the ceiling, Elena’s eyes unfocused, as if she was gazing at something far away.

“I’ll tell you an interesting story. When I was ten, I suddenly became capable of using magic. Then the Nigren palace men came. They ordered my family to turn me over to the state. My parents and the village elder said no. The royals had never done a single thing to help our village, after all.”

I remained silent, watching her.

A long while ago, when I was still attending Grail Academy, I’d learned about the magicians who’d started to appear among the mountainfolk due to a spontaneous genetic mutation resulting in children possessing magic. A tug-of-war over the children had ensued. I’d learned about it from Claude.

That must be what Elena was talking about.

According to Claude, the new strain of magicians belonged to a village located right on the border, belonging to a tribe that lived independently from the country of Nigren and its governance. That’s why it took so long for Nigren to

discover the existence of the magicians and learn about the mutation that led to their powers.

“And then...what do you think they did?” Elena stared at me with wild eyes. “They arrested everyone! They said that refusing to comply with royal orders was a crime. And ever since that day, no one has ever seen or heard of my people again!”

I swallowed hard.

As the weight of Elena’s story and the true extent of her grudge became clear to me, I found myself filled with a sense of hopelessness.

“I *hate* them! I hate them *all*! They said it was for my own good, but they were only thinking of themselves! They acted all nice to me when they really just saw me as a wild hillfolk brat who never listened to reason! They looked down their noses at me! They treated me like a precious commodity, but if I woke up one day without my magic, they’d throw me out with the trash!”

Spittle flew from Elena’s lips.

“No...”

That wasn’t true.

That was what I wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t come.

Was it really like that, though?

Would the people of Nigren continue to treat Elena well, even if she lost her value to them? I knew that I couldn’t say for sure that they would.

“But there was *one* person who was nice.” Elena’s voice softened. “I liked him a lot...”

“Him?”

“The prince from the neighboring kingdom. When we met for the first time in Najir, he’d no idea who I was, but still, he smiled at me.”

I took a step back. But I immediately bumped up against the bed where Karina slept and could go no further.

The bed shook and Karina mumbled something in her sleep.

Elena watched the two of us with zero expression on her face.

“You two are lucky. You were born royalty, with everyone liking you and treating you well. One day, you will marry wonderful husbands and live your whole lives never knowing a single hardship.”

“I’m not—”

That’s when it happened.

The door to the hallway began to clatter and rattle.

“Princess? Princess!!!”

It was Ed’s voice, calling out to me!

The door had clearly been sealed shut with magic. I could hear it shaking on its hinges as they tried to break it down from the hallway.

“I’ve enjoyed our chat, but it looks like we’re out of time.”

Elena glanced at the door before grinning at me.

“Please, stop this...”

“It’s too late to stop now. But I have a plan. All I have to do is get rid of the interlopers, then erase the memories of everyone in the palace. That way, I can go back to living happily here, posing as the princess. That magician you brought with you showed me some truly useful magic.”

Elena was smiling, but her eyes were ice-cold.

She was ice-cold.

The more she’d talked, the more I came to pity her.

“Break, Spell.”

As Elena muttered the spell-breaker, the shield I’d cast between us suddenly shattered into pieces that scattered all over the ornate rugs.

This was all about revenge. It was all an elaborate plot for revenge, masterminded by a girl who’d had her family and people torn away from her.

“Stay back!”

I cast another protective spell as Elena reached for me. Immediately, she

broke it again.

Harold and Daniel seemed to have become aware of the commotion from next door, and I could hear them yelling things like “Break the door down!” and “Just get it open somehow!”

“Ed!” I screamed for help. I wouldn’t be able to stop her alone.

It seemed like they’d heard me. The banging on the door became even more furious.

“There you go...running to others for help again. You just take it for granted that someone will *always* come to save you, don’t you?” Elena gave me a look of hatred. “That’s why I *hate* all of you royals.”

A flash of light suddenly emanated from her.

She’s trying to kill me!

I covered my head, squeezing my eyes shut. But I felt no pain. There’d been no attack.

Gingerly, I opened my eyes, then gasped.

Another magic shield had sprung up between Elena and me. One clearly much stronger than anything I’d ever been able to conjure myself.

“...The hell is that? Nobody told me you could do *that!*”

Elena was shrieking at me, her eyes wide.

Could...could it be...

I touched the Magic Stone hanging from my neck under my shirt. It glinted with red light.

The Magic Stone the Ed from my old world had given me...it had protected me.

Knowing my old Ed is still protecting me... I can do this. I have to do this.

If the magical power contained in the Magic Stone ran out, its mysterious powers would cease. And it’d take a while for it to recharge itself using the power of its caster, so I needed to act fast. Even now, Ed was outside the room, trying to break the curse that’d sealed the door.

Gathering all my magical power, I shot a Spellbreaking spell at the door to break down its magical lock.

SLAM!

“Karina! Are you all right?!”

“Princess!”

Harold and the others stormed into the room.

Elena tutted in anger, waving a hand in their direction.

A thunderbolt appeared out of nowhere and burned the rug at their feet, filling the air with a horrible smell.

“Stand back, Princes!”

Ed stepped forward, ushering Harold and Daniel back. Then he cast a protective shield in front of them.

“Elena, that’s enough! What’s your motive for doing all of this, anyway?” Harold was peering over Ed’s shoulder, glaring at Elena.

“Shut up!”

Completely cornered now, Elena glared back at Harold.

“*You’re* to blame for it, all of you. If you’d just left us alone, none of this would have happened.”

Elena’s voice was high and trembly. She looked like a crying child, and I felt a pang of pity for her.

“You should all just *disappear!*”

I felt another surge of magical power from Elena, but I barely had time to feel fear. My Magic Stone had gone from pink to white.

The blast from Elena’s magic shook the entire room.

At the same moment, the magical shield in front of me shattered.

“Princess!”

Before Elena could strike, someone grabbed me tight in their arms. Enveloped in the warmth of their arms, I heard and felt another blast.

Then there was silence. Horrible silence. I opened my eyes.

“Ed?”

It was Ed who’d leaped in between Elena and me and shielded me with his body.

A pillar of flame leaped up all around us, but he cast ice magic to dispel it.

Next, she tried lightning magic, but he counterattacked with earth.

RUMBLE!

The ground was shaking beneath our feet.

Ed and Elena were locked in a furious battle of wills, staring each other down.

“Just give it up! You can’t win like this.”

“So I should just go back to letting these people use me as a *puppet*?! They stole my *family* and made me a *slave*!” Elena roared back at Ed in fury. “Once I learned how to use Transportation magic, I returned to my village. Just once. The houses and fields had fallen into ruin, completely abandoned. A rich boy like *you*—the special favorite of a princess—could *never* understand how that feels!”

A tear spilled down Elena’s cheek as she continued to scream at Ed.

Ed drew in his breath.

“...You’re mistaken, Elena.” It was Prince Harold who spoke next, as he watched what was going on from the doorway. “With our gratitude for raising such a gifted magician, your family accepted better land elsewhere, along with a huge cash sum. The reason your village has fallen into ruin is because your people have abandoned it and moved.”

“You *liar*! That’s not true! You threatened my parents! You told them if they didn’t do exactly what you said, you’d lock them up!”

“No, it’s the truth. Your family is alive and well as we speak. But if there was any misunderstanding, we’ll take full responsibility. I’ll dispatch men to your people’s old village to make sure.”

Harold spoke calmly and reasonably to Elena, who’d been acting so emotional

and enraged moments before. But now, hearing Harold's words at last, her fury seemed to be subsiding.

That's when Daniel spoke.

"If you don't believe them, I'll go along to check. I'll go to the old village of your people and the new one. I'll check to see if the daisies are still blooming where you grew up."

"How...do you know...about that..."

Elena seemed stunned and blinked rapidly at Daniel.

Daisies...

Those beautiful, white flowers.

I suddenly remembered when Elena came to Najir...

Ed had offered Elena a daisy that he'd conjured with Transference magic, and she'd lit up with a smile for the first and only time.

"I still don't trust *you*, though. You betrayed me. I thought you were nice! But you're not."

Elena glared at Daniel.

But Daniel merely smiled wryly in return.

"Well, if it turns out I'm lying about any of this, you can put a collar on me."

"Yeah, I *will*!"

"Go ahead. That's fine with me."

Elena tried to call Daniel's bluff. But he wasn't bluffing.

Daniel offered his hand to her. She stared at it for a long moment before tentatively reaching out toward him...

Just as their hands were about to meet...

"Don't!"

Daniel suddenly yelled out in panic.

For a second, I thought he was yelling at Elena not to touch his hand, but then

I realized what was really happening.

One of the guards snuck up behind Elena and swung his sword...

Blood sprayed out, drenching the rug.

Elena fell to the ground, her hand missing Daniel's on the way down.

"Someone get a doctor!"

Daniel was yelling. Harold stumbled out into the hallway, looking for help.

"There's no *time* for a doctor! We have to use healing magic!"

I hurried forward and tried to cast healing magic on Elena. But I'd exhausted most of my magical energy in my fight against her, and I couldn't call it forth.

"Ed!!!"

"I'll do it."

Ed dashed forward and began casting magic on Elena. But the wound wouldn't close, and she remained lying on the carpet. Ed frowned down at her, looking stressed out.

"It's not..."

It wasn't working.

Ed's voice grew low and indistinct.

Healing magic can't do everything. It can heal surface wounds, but it can't keep people alive if they're on the verge of death. No magic can.

"I knew it...you're all *liars*...all of you royals."

Blood sprayed from between Elena's lips.

"I..."

Ed shook his head furiously, realizing that magical power was beginning to emanate from Elena.

"Don't! You're just bringing death closer!"

It seemed that, even now, Elena was trying to cast magic.

But the effort was killing her.

Still, Elena continued to gather forth her magical power.

Then, with a flash, the blood-stained rug beneath her body began to glow.

“It’s a... Magic Sigil...” I muttered in surprise as I stared at the glowing shape.

Elena had conjured a circle around six feet in diameter, filled with glowing lines and symbols.

I’d learned a bit about Magic Sigils since starting my life in this timeline. I thought I’d seen all the specific types. But I’d never seen a Magic Sigil that looked like this before.

Ed didn’t seem to know this one, either. He quickly tugged me away from Elena, outside the Magic Sigil’s borders. Then he gazed down at the ground, his red eyes wide with surprise.

I just wanted to be happy.

Elena’s lips moved. Her words were almost imperceptible, but somehow, I knew what she wanted to say.

“You’re all *liars*. I hate you all...”

I heard that last part, though. We all did.

The Magic Sigil flashed, enveloping Elena in its glow.

It was so bright, I couldn’t stop myself from closing my eyes.



A gentle breeze rolled off the sea and blew my hair back. I reached up to smooth it down with one hand.

Before me stretched the blue ocean. It seemed to go on forever. It looked so peaceful. It seemed strange after the horrible tragedy that had taken place here the other day.

“Princess Annabel, it’s almost time.”

It was Hendrick, my guard. He was calling out to me gently.

“All right.”

I turned and nodded, then took one more look out at the vast ocean. Shaking

my head a little, I turned back once more and walked out of the gazebo.

“The trunks have already been loaded into the carriages. The Nigrenians have already gathered to see us off. You’re to address them.”

Hendrick tipped his head, indicating that my presence was required.

Today, I was to return to Najir.

We’d only been here a matter of days, yet somehow, it seemed like years since we’d traveled to the border via Magic Sigil.

After everything had happened, Prince Harold conducted an investigation to see if there was any truth behind Elena’s claims.

The results were unexpected. It turned out that there was an element of truth to both sides of the story.

Upon discovering the existence of a new breed of magical children in the hills, Nigren had sent men to go and retrieve Elena from her village. Since Nigren had so few magic users of its own, they considered the new breed of magicians to be vital assets to the country’s development and prosperity. They were an extremely valued resource.

At first, her parents had refused to hand over their precious daughter. The Nigrenians had offered increasingly valuable treasures and wealth to tempt them. Elena’s tribe had liked that. They became increasingly demanding until they’d reached the point of insisting that their members were installed in positions of influence in government. The Nigrenians were at a loss about how to come to an agreement.

This was the same story Claude had told me while we were both students at Grail Academy.

The demands of the hill-tribe ended up incensing the Nigrenian politicians.

Then they threatened Elena’s tribe with treason if they continued to hold out and extracted Elena by force, bringing her back to the palace with them.

In the end, Elena’s tribe had accepted a decent sum of money and land from Prince Harold and moved to a different location.

There are two kinds of people in this world.

Some handle unexpected good luck and fortune well and wisely. And some lose their heads, go too far, and ruin everything for themselves.

Unfortunately, Elena's tribe was the latter.

They'd wasted the money on extravagant frivolities, and soon, it was all gone. Then they came back to the Nigrenian officials, demanding their daughter's return. They were arrested for trespassing.

In the end, they had to sell the land to pay off their debts. After that, they'd disappeared without a trace.

I just wanted to be happy.

Elena's final words haunted me.

I believe that was the honest wish of her soul.

From what I could make of it, her childhood was filled with misfortune.

Born to a poor tribe, scratching out a living in the barren hills, Elena spent her early days in poverty.

I'd also learned her real name. It was "Hily," a derogatory term in their language. It meant "creature" or "monster." Not only had her tribe treated her like an outcast—a freak—due to her magical powers, they'd also refused to give her a proper name.

I think she must've been happy to find herself in Nigren, among kind people for the first time.

Compared to the horrible mistreatment she'd suffered in her youth, the people of Nigren treated her like someone special. Even though she was aware she'd been bought for large sums of money, she didn't care. That was how alone she'd been.

"Hendrick...do you think that she's gone to Heaven?"

"I don't know, Princess. Perhaps...if she prayed while she was still alive."

Hendrick's gaze was solemn.

I gazed back at him, finally smiling a little.

That was Hendrick for you. The man was always so serious about everything.

None of us knew what the final spell cast by Elena had really been.

Even Ed, the Royal Magician of the most magical land in the world, said he'd never seen it before. It was truly an unknown form of magic.

After Elena died, a thorough search of Karina's room turned up several notebooks filled with black magic. Among them were copies of the Classified Books that'd been stolen during the celebrations for my coming-of-age.

During her visit to Najir, Elena was able to observe many forms of magic, including Ed's Illusion spell. Then, using her unique power as an Eidetic Magician, she could make them her own. She disguised herself as Ed, who had free access to the Classified Books section, and stole them.

But they'd been discovered missing right away, and Najir leaped into action, immediately launching a search. She'd panicked and quickly put them back. But not before she'd made copies.

The copies were well-thumbed, with copious notes written in the margins.

"She really *was* a magical genius, wasn't she? What a shame."

Ed's words, as he flipped through the notes, struck me as very significant.

Would things have been different if Nigren had discovered Elena sooner and gone to take her away from her miserable childhood home?

What if she'd been raised in Najir instead and given the finest magical education?

What if someone had taken notice of her as a person rather than an asset?

It was all too late now, but I couldn't help thinking...

If only it was possible to go back in time and do things over...

12. Going Home

I arrived in the antechamber to find the Najirian and Sunrutan delegations, including Daniel, all there already. The Nigren king and queen, Prince Harold, and Karina were there to say goodbye to us.

“Thank you very much for having us.” I approached the stage and swept into a deep bow.

The Nigren King looked down at me, nodding.

“Thank you for all your assistance in the recent matters, Princess Annabel.”

Prince Harold had told his father, the king, all about what had happened. I smiled, pleased to be directly thanked by the king himself.

“I’m happy I was able to be of service. But without Prince Harold and Prince Daniel’s help, I would never have been able to save Karina.”

Prince Harold pulled all kinds of strings to get us access to Karina. And if Daniel hadn’t been there, we wouldn’t have had the chance to get close to Karina with Fake Karina around.

“I am deeply grateful to both kingdoms,” His Majesty said.

I had come to Nigren to foster closer relations between my country and the neighboring kingdoms. A lot of unexpected things had happened during this trip, but it was still a big success for my first solo international visit.

After saying goodbye in the antechamber, we made our way to the carriage yard.

On my way there, I heard someone call my name from behind.

“Prince Daniel...” I said.

It was Daniel, on his way to his own carriage.

Today, he was wearing a lavish, aristocratic outfit with shining gold epaulets.

He looked every inch the royal prince.

I stopped and waited for him to catch up to me.

“Prince Daniel, thank you very much for all your assistance with everything during our stay here.”

“Ah, don’t mention it. I should be the one thanking you.”

Daniel dismissed my thanks.

I watched him for a moment, then I asked him the question that’d been weighing on my mind for days.

“Prince Daniel...the other day, you told me about the strange dreams you’ve been having. Are they really just dreams?”

The world of Daniel’s dreams seemed different from the timeline I had come from. In my previous lifetime, I’d never heard anyone mention the “Witch of the South.”

But perhaps Daniel really *did* share some memories of the old world with me? I just couldn’t shake that feeling somehow.

Daniel shook his head though, smiling.

“Yes, they were just dreams. Strange dreams, though, right? But this incident has made me suspect I may have some premonition-like abilities...”

“I see...” I smiled vaguely, feeling like I was unable to press him further.

“A lot happened, so we didn’t really get to spend much quality time together on this trip. Let’s make up for that next time.”

“I’d like that.” I nodded, but Daniel was staring intensely at me for some reason.

“Do you know what I mean by that, Princess Annabel?”

“Hmm?”

I tilted my head in confusion and Daniel smiled wryly.

“I intend to marry you. When I came to Najir, your father told me they wouldn’t consider marriage talks until your eighteenth birthday. I will come

again then.”

I started blushing furiously as I realized what he was talking about. I remembered that Daniel had brought up marriage when he came to Najir for my coming-of-age party.

My eighteenth birthday...

It was only a little over a year away.

“Is *he* the reason you asked for marriage talks to be delayed?” he asked.

“What?”

Daniel jerked his head across the yard. I could see Toll and Ed walking this way. I blinked for a few seconds, then pasted a nonchalant look on my face.

“Why would you think that?”

“I saw how frantic you were the other day. It’s clear he’s someone very important to you. Besides, he’s a Royal Magician, but he attends to your safety as if he were your guardian knight.”

I blushed, looking away. I *was* frantic the other day. Daniel was referring to what happened after everything was over with Elena. Ed had exhausted himself trying to keep everyone else in the vicinity safe with his magic. Once everything was over, he completely collapsed.

Luckily, he’d made a complete recovery after resting a while. But for some time, I thought history was repeating itself. That Ed was going to die protecting me once again. I was quite beside myself with panic and worry.

It was unheard of for a crown princess to fall for a Royal Magician, much less delay marriage talks for his benefit. But Daniel didn’t seem to blame me at all. His gaze was earnest as I looked up and met his eyes again.

“Also...”

“Also what?”

Daniel seemed about to say something, but then he shook his head.

“Isn’t he an aristocrat in Najir?” he said instead.

“...Yes, he is. But he’s the second son, so he won’t inherit a title. He says he

wants to become a Magic Count instead...”

“A Magic Count?” Daniel was clearly unfamiliar with the term.

“It’s a special kind of rank we have in our country. It’s on par with an actual count. It’s a title we sometimes bestow to magicians who’ve done extraordinary work for the good of the country.”

“I see.”

Daniel nodded, seeming to understand.

This was why my father had pushed back marriage talks until my eighteenth birthday, to honor the request of one of our most promising magicians.

“So, this ‘extraordinary work for the good of the country...,’ is it due to be completed soon?”

I shook my head. Ed was trying all kinds of things. But, so far, I’d heard nothing about any conclusive results or progress.

“He wants to create a Magic Sigil that can be used by people who can’t use magic. But it’s apparently very difficult.”

“I see,” Daniel said. Then he fell silent as if thinking hard about something.

We’d reached our carriages by now.

The Najirian and Sunrutan delegations were due to leave at the same time, so the carriage yard was very crowded with horses, carriages, people, and luggage.

Suddenly, Daniel turned back the way we’d come.

“I hear you’re working on developing a Magic Sigil that can be used without magical power?” It was Ed that Daniel was speaking to. He was coming up behind us. “If you manage to pull it off, that’d mean that the Nigrenians and my people would be able to use magic easily, just like the Najirians, wouldn’t it?”

Ed looked surprised to be directly addressed by Daniel. But he soon realized that Daniel was asking out of a genuine interest in his magical research.



“Yes, that’s what I’m working on right now. But I still have a long way to go.”

“I see,” Daniel said, then paused for a moment. “You know, I had the most interesting dream recently.”

“A...A dream?”

Ed looked confused and worried, unsure what Daniel was talking about. But Daniel seemed unperturbed. Instead, he gave Ed a wry smile and continued.

“Yes. In the dream, I saw a man activate a Magic Sigil when he couldn’t use magic.”

Ed frowned, staring at Daniel. “...Is such a thing possible, I wonder?”

“I don’t know. It was only a dream. And all I remember about the man is that he wore a magic-blocking collar. And he carried a Magic Stone. That’s all.”

“A magic-blocking collar and a Magic Stone...?”

Daniel grinned.

“Well, good luck with your research.”

Daniel returned his gaze to me, leaving Ed standing there in confusion.

I was too shocked to speak.

A magic-blocking collar?

But...that almost sounds like...

“Princess Annabel, I will come for you. In one year’s time.” Then Daniel leaned in and kissed my cheek next to my lips. “Stay well, my princess...”

A sudden breeze sent his blue cloak rippling as he walked away.

I just stood there watching him leave.



OUR route back to Najir was the reverse of our route there.

We would ride by carriage across Nigren to the border with Najir. Once we crossed over, we were going to stop at the closest city to the border and take the Magic Sigil back to the palace.

As I settled down in the carriage, the horses started off, and the carriage began to roll. Just then, I heard someone faintly calling my name, and I sat up in a hurry.

“Princess Annabel!”

I heard it distinctly this time.

I quickly stuck my head out of the window to see Karina running down the palace steps. Her cheeks were red with excitement and effort. I halted my carriage so she could catch up.

“What is it, Princess Karina?”

Karina had mostly been resting in her room after everything that had happened. I was surprised but pleased to see her in the antechamber earlier. Why was she running after my carriage, though?

“Um, I wanted to say how grateful I am! You saved my life...” Karina gasped breathlessly when she finally made it to my carriage window.

Then she held out a small box. It was pure white, tied with a bow. Very adorable.

“I had this made when we decided you would visit me. It matches mine!”

“Oh?”

I accepted the box and opened the lid. Inside, there was a delicate metal brooch with flowers on it. When Karina first invited me to Nigren...it had been before Elena switched places with her.

I was surprised and touched by the unexpected gift.

“Will you come back to Nigren again someday?”

Karina was gazing at me with her wide, emerald-green eyes, as if afraid I would turn her down...

According to Toll, he and Ed had succeeded in removing the last of the spell from Karina, to an extent. The childlike behavior she’d exhibited had finally tapered off.

But Karina could only remember what had happened before and after being

switched. She had no memory of what had transpired in between. All we could do was wait to see if those memories ever came back.

But Karina heard about what happened from Prince Harold, and I think she was worried I was leaving with a bad impression of Nigren. Or that I would stop wanting to be friends with her.

I smiled down at her, wanting to relieve her fears.

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “We’re friends, right?”

Karina’s smile was like a flower blooming after a long rain.

13. Daniel's Point of View

I remember the dreams started coming when I was around ten years old.

I had the same dream, over and over. It was a happy dream. In the dream, I was in love with a girl who was as lovely as a flower.

As the only prince of my country, I wasn't free to marry who I wanted. That's why I was a very lucky prince indeed.

My country, the Sunruta Kingdom, wasn't blessed with magic. Around ninety percent of the world's magicians come from our neighboring country, Najir. I'm not sure why that is. Perhaps it's an issue of genetics or environment. But as a result, the Sunruta Kingdom had few defenses against magical attacks.

So my father decided that a political marriage between Princess Annabel of Najir and me would be the best thing for our country's safety.

Love's not necessary for a political marriage.

That's what I always thought. But when I met her, I fell head over heels in love.

Her long, golden hair. Her eyes, like green jewels.

She was gentle, sweet, and always smiling.

Despite being royal and refined, she expressed a childlike joy when excited. I had intended to marry her all along, since that was what my father wanted. But the instant I laid eyes on her, I knew that I personally wanted to be with her for all of my days.

And I wanted her as my wife.

I found everything about her so completely charming.

"Princess Annabel..."

When I awoke, the dream was still fresh in my mind.

Last night, she'd showed me that same innocent smile. I'd still never met her

in real life, but I found myself intensely curious about this girl...this princess from the neighboring land of Najir.

It was only a dream.

It was highly unlikely the real Princess Annabel would be anything like the one from my dream. Even knowing that, I was desperate to meet the real one.

When would it be?

The years went by, and the happy dreams slowly morphed into nightmares.

Sometimes, I saw terrible, frightening things.

Pillars of smoke. The palace in ruins. Blood-soaked knights.

My beloved, slumped expressionless in a jail cell.

And a sword, flashing through the air.

Everything about the dream was hazy and indistinct but somehow still terrible. It was like there was a veil over my mind, shrouding everything. I felt like I wasn't myself...

But I did know several things.

I somehow knew that magic was involved in my mind's cloudiness and the lack of free will I'd experienced in the dream. And I knew that the woman who'd thrown my beloved into the jail cell was really a witch.

I also knew that this woman, the "Witch of the South," could change her appearance to look like anyone.

I need to find a way to protect myself against magic.

The nightmare kept recurring. And every time, I found myself more determined to find a way to keep myself safe.

I discussed things with my father, and we went ahead with building a Magical Research Laboratory in our capital. We also gathered every magician in the land and invited them to work at the facility. For high pay, of course.

Doing all this based on a dream...I know it seems crazy from the outside. But I couldn't get the image of my sweet princess, crying with despair, out of my mind. So I felt I'd no choice but to act.

I'd thought our country had almost no magicians, but once we had them all gathered in the research lab, we had quite a large number.

We were even able to attract some of the new magicians who'd come about due to genetic mutations. We paid them handsomely to come and work at our lab. They started working on magical defense and made great strides in that area.



I first met the real Princess Annabel when she came to my crowning ceremony. I strongly emphasized that she should be invited.

"I will make sure to have the palace decorated with beautiful dahlias to greet you when you arrive."

That's what I wrote in her invitation.

Luckily, dahlias were in season. And I knew that the Annabel of my dreams loved dahlias.

Then, when I met her for the first time, I was shocked to my core. She looked exactly the way I saw her in my dreams.

Long, golden hair. Bright green eyes.

A delicate nose. Long lashes. Even her smile, down to the last detail.

Such coincidences don't exist...do they? What if my dreams were actually a premonition?

That's how identical she was to my dream. So identical, I believed it *had* to be a premonition.

And then I was filled with a new resolve.

I'd do whatever I could to bring happiness to the girl who'd cried and suffered so much in the world of my dreams.

In that world, I was already unofficially engaged to Annabel.

Princess Annabel was a vital asset to be obtained for the good of the Sunruta Kingdom. After all, we were so close to the magical land of Najir, yet we were unprotected.

But in the real world, the Sunruta Kingdom now had its own Magical Research Laboratory and magical defenses. It didn't *need* Princess Annabel's connections for its own protection. So, no talk of any potential marriage between us had ever been brought up.

I had talks with my own people and then tried to broach the subject with the king of Najir myself. But the king said that Najir was waiting. That no marriage talks would be considered until the princess's eighteenth birthday.

How...strange.

An alliance with the Sunruta Kingdom wouldn't be a bad option for Najir, either. I was sure they'd accept my offer, but they hadn't.

When I saw her again, though, I realized why.

There was another man in her heart.

It was a Najirian aristocrat.

There was nothing to hint at anything romantic between them when they interacted in public. But I saw the joy in her face when she looked at him...and I just knew.

I've seen him before somewhere...

After thinking it over, it came to me.

I *had* seen him in my dreams.

He'd always been by Princess Annabel's side, protecting her. But something was different between the dream world and the real world. So many similarities, but so many differences as well.

In the dream world, he was a Magic Knight. But in this world, he was a Royal Magician. And the Witch of the South from my dream...compared to the weak, quiet Elena I'd met in real life, she was leagues more ferocious, more powerful, and terrible...

What if it wasn't a premonition? What if I've gone back in time as the result of some sort of spell?

I tried broaching the subject with Princess Annabel several times, but she

always smiled vaguely. I wondered if she was having the same dreams, too?

What if the dreams I was having were actually flashes of my past life?

But who'd cast such extreme magic on me? And for what purpose?

If my suspicions were true, then there was only one thing I could do. I'd protect the peace of the Sunruta Kingdom so that it never met that horrible blood-soaked fate.

And I would find a way to ensure the princess's happiness.

Even if it didn't involve being with me...

Part Three: The First Happiness

14. The Magic Sigil's Completion

TIME marched on. It'd now been six months since my visit to Nigren.

A beautiful fall was upon us and the trees were all dressed in reds and golds. Little birds gathered in their branches, singing beautiful songs.

In contrast to the peace of nature, the Magic Research Lab was bustling with people, and the atmosphere was one of tense excitement. A large-scale magical object was brought into the banquet hall and unloaded with a heavy bang.

"Everything is prepared. This way, please."

Upon Ed's direction, the woman nervously walked forward. She was one of the rare citizens of Najir who couldn't produce magic as an adult. In front of the woman was a very tiny Magic Sigil, drawn on the floor. It measured only eleven inches.

"Please set the Magic Crystal in the hole."

The woman nodded, placing the Magic Crystal into the small depression. The Magic Crystal was the commercially sold type. Then, the Magic Sigil, which until now had been drawn with only plain white lines, lit up with a magical glow. The glow turned into sparkling magical particles, and a ring of fire formed in the air above the Magic Sigil.

"It's incredible! I did that? *Me?!?*"

The woman's eyes were wide with shock, and she covered her mouth with her hands, clearly very moved.

"*You* did that."

"The Magic Sigil really worked!"

The crowd began to gossip together and there were several shouts of

excitement.

Magic Sigils are an extremely useful invention, allowing anyone to produce high-end magic spells, as long as they have magic power of their own to channel.

But there was one flaw. Magic Sigils couldn't be used by those who had no magic of their own or those who couldn't effectively channel magic into magical artifacts.

But now, before our eyes, a woman who'd lived all her life never being able to use magic was able to use this Magic Sigil. This was an invention that'd change lives.

Standing near the woman were several examiners, who were here to oversee the experiment and ensure that nobody else was secretly channeling magic into the Magic Sigil.

One of the men was my brother, Charles, who now stepped forward.

"I can verify that there was no outside interference involved in the activation of this Magic Sigil."

"I, too, vouch for the same."

One by one, each of the other four men backed up Charles's statement. Once they were done, the crowd really began to get excited.

"We've done it! At long last!"

Everyone was impressed and proud.

But there was no one prouder than I.

Ed, you're incredible!

History had just been made, right before my eyes.

A Magic Sigil that even non-magical folk could use. It would help so many people who'd suffered all their lives from a lack of magic.

Most people born in Najir grow up to be proficient magic users, but a percentage of the population remains non-magical. Our society is built around magic, so life tends to be difficult for them.

For example, many of our basic household and cooking apparatuses need magical power to be channeled into them to work. However, with this Magic Sigil and a charged Magic Crystal, even non-magical people could now use magic. There was no need for them to toil doing manual work anymore.

This invention would also change the lives of people all across the world. It wasn't only limited to the non-magical folk of Najir.

"Ed, you did it at last! Congratulations!"

Charles enveloped Ed in a bear hug. Ed had pioneered this research and brought it to fruition. The glory was all his.

All of the people clapped and cheered.

Standing among them, I too clapped until my palms were sore.



AFTER the experiment was over, I headed surreptitiously to the Magical Research Lab.

I wanted to see Ed and congratulate him in person. After many visits, I was familiar with the place, so I headed right to Ed's room and knocked on the door. There was no reply, so I softly turned the handle. It wasn't locked and opened easily before me.

"Ed? Are you here?"

The room was silent.

Carefully, I stepped inside, looking around.

Various books and papers were laid out on top of the large desk. I took a peek; the pages were covered with strange symbols. *These must be Ed's notes.* He'd worked night and day on this research.

I looked toward the other side of the room. There were many Magic Sigils drawn there. Some I remembered from my school days. One of them I recognized as the fire-producing Magic Sigil we'd just seen in action.

There was also a basket filled with Magic Crystals.

Is this where he set the Magic Crystals and checked to see if they activated the

sigils?

I picked up one of the Magic Crystals and turned it over in my hand.

CLACK.

I heard the sound of the door opening behind me and quickly put the Magic Crystal back down on the table. Turning, I saw Ed walk into the room.

“Princess?”

“Sorry for coming in uninvited. I wanted to congratulate you in person!”

I felt sorry for intruding, but Ed smiled.

“You’re welcome anytime, Princess.”

“Thank you. But you should really keep this room locked up, you know! What if someone tries to steal your research?”

“It *was* locked. With Identification magic.”

“No, it wasn’t locked. I was able to come straight in.”

Everyone’s magic power has a different ‘flavor’ to it, or so they say. Identification magic used for locks like this will only work if it recognizes the specific magical power of a pre-approved person.

But I just turned the handle and walked right in.

I was frowning, but Ed chuckled.

“I set it to open only for me and you, Princess.”

“You did?”

“I’m glad I did so. It was a real pleasure to find you waiting for me in here, Princess.” Ed took my hand and pulled me to his chest. “Princess...my research was a success.” He whispered in my ear as he held me close.

“Yes. Congratulations, Ed. You’re truly amazing.”

I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight.

I always knew that Ed could do it. But a lot of people seemed honestly stunned by this new magical invention.

“Actually, the idea behind the key to this invention didn’t come from me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember when we went to Nigren?”

“Of course.”

I leaned back a little to gaze into Ed’s eyes.

Our trip to Nigren had been six months ago. A lot had happened in such a short space of time, though, so it felt like it’d only been yesterday.

“It was actually Prince Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom who gave me the idea. He talked about a man wearing a magic-blocking collar and holding a Magic Stone. A man who activated a Magic Sigil when, by rights, he should’ve been unable to.”

My heart skipped a beat.

Yes, Daniel did say that.

I’d no proof, but I believed he’d been talking about the *other* Ed. From my old world.

Ed kept talking, not noticing my discomfort. “Anti-magic collars work by sucking up the magical energy of the wearer and storing it. Conversely, Magic Stones are a variety of Magic Crystals. So I suspected that it might be possible to use the unique magic-extracting and storing properties of the anti-magic device and adapt it so that the stored power can then also be brought forth. Then, I’d affix this device to a Magic Sigil. After that, I’d only need to set a Magic Crystal infused with magical power, to hopefully activate the sigil and release the magical power stored within.”

“I see...”

That’s when a suspicion took hold of me. The Ed from my old world had invoked his magical power only after handing me his own Magic Stone.

So the person Daniel was talking about...it must’ve been someone else?

Daniel had said that the dreams were the same ones he kept having over and over.

But were they really just dreams?

“Anyway, I’m just glad I managed to finish in the timeline I set for myself. If it’d taken just a little longer, I might’ve lost you to some foreign prince!”

Ed looked relieved as he blew air slowly through his nose.

Daddy had given us two years during which he’d block all incoming marriage negotiations. That period was due to last until my eighteenth birthday, just a couple of months away.

It had been close, all right.

“If things had come to that, I’d planned to change my career and become a Magic Knight, so I could guard you and be your guardian knight. Well, I suppose I can’t let my guard down just yet.”

Ed chuckled like a schoolboy.

Yes...Ed had another objective for his research, besides benefiting the lives of many others. He wanted to attain the rank of Magic Count so that we could be together. But it was up to the royal officials to decide whether or not to bestow this title upon Ed. Nothing had been decided yet.

Ed’s invention was amazing, to be sure. But only time would tell how useful it proved itself to be. And we still needed to see if other researchers could replicate the results.

“It will be fine; I know it.”

Ed still looked worried. But I wasn’t.

For a few moments after that, we stayed silent, simply gazing into each other’s eyes as we embraced.



THREE months had passed since Ed’s successful Magic Sigil was unveiled.

Aristocrats had come from all over to attend the King’s Special Assembly.

Ed stood in the middle of the assembly hall. I was seated behind Daddy, my eyes firmly fixed on Ed. His short black hair was smoothed back and his face was tense.

“Step forward, Edoile Licht La Boulacherie.”

Ed walked forward upon Daddy’s summons and paused in front of the throne. Then he knelt, lowering his head. Daddy ordered him to lift his head and Ed did so.

“Your research is truly remarkable! The name of Najir will be celebrated across the world as many other countries benefit from your incredible invention. As a reward for your efforts for our country, I hereby appoint you Senior Royal Magician and bequeath to you a large estate located not far from the palace.”

Daddy was bestowing a new title and lands upon Ed as a reward for his invention.

Senior Royal Magician was a high title indeed, as there were only a few, and they were considered the absolute magical elite. In this era, where the title of Magic Count was legendary and seemingly unobtainable, Senior Royal Magician was the highest title the king could bestow on a magician.

Ed listened intensely to Daddy’s words, motionless. Daddy paused then, having come to the end of the list of lands and properties Ed would receive.

“I thank you for this honor, Your Highness.” Ed bowed low before Daddy.

I watched in solemn, stunned silence.

It can’t be...? It’s not happening, after all?

Yes, Ed had received a high title and lands and riches and all that. But what we wanted most of all was for him to get that special title of Magic Count.

I was so sure it’d all work out fine... I was shocked with dismay.

“And there is one more item to discuss.” Daddy was speaking again. “I bestow upon you the title of Magic Count.”

The crowd erupted in excited cheers.

Everyone knew that a Special Assembly had been called, and there was a lot of gossip about why. But no one could’ve expected that a new Magic Count would be announced. After all, there hadn’t been one in a hundred years, not since the great magician Longile.

The title of Magic Count was on par with that of a real count.

It came with no lands, but it was a title that would rank Ed at the top of the peerage.

“Thank you, Your Highness...! I am most pleased to accept. As Magic Count, I swear to...I swear to serve the land of Najir for as long as I live...!”

The tension seemed to have left Ed’s body suddenly, and he trailed off, as if overcome and lost for words. Daddy looked down at Ed and broke into a big smile.

“I consider myself blessed to rule a land with a magician like you to call our own. We’re all excited to see what you do next.” Then Daddy lowered his voice a few octaves. “We can discuss the *other* details elsewhere. Later.”

Then Daddy raised his hands high to signal that the Assembly was over.

All of a sudden, Ed was surrounded by people wanting to shake his hand, clap him on the back, and be among the first ones to tell him “Congratulations!”

15. My Eighteenth Birthday

AFTER the day of the King's Assembly, I didn't see Ed as much.

A Magic Count has no land to govern, but Ed was still busy with the official paperwork for the lands he *had* been bestowed as Senior Royal Magician and other administrative matters.

He was so busy, I actually became concerned and wrote him a letter. He responded by saying that he was fine, reminding me to stay well and things like that. So it seemed like Ed was holding up all right.

And then my eighteenth birthday rolled around.

When I awoke, the entire room smelled like flowers.

"Happy birthday, Princess Annabel."

Noticing I was awake, Ellie came over and opened the curtains around my canopy bed by tugging on the tassels. Now I could see the room. It was filled wall to wall with flowers.

"There's so many this year again too!"

That explained the strong floral scent. Like last year, I was delighted to know that so many people wanted to celebrate my birthday.

"And there are lots of cards too!"

I was still taking in the beautiful flowers when Ellie showed me a tray covered with envelopes.

"Oh, wow!"

I got to my feet and went to look at the envelopes she had placed on the table.

Is there anything from Ed?

I couldn't spot anything that looked like it bore his handwriting.

“Why don’t you leave the letters for later? If you start reading them now, you’ll be late for breakfast. You don’t want to keep the king and queen waiting.”

Ellie smiled as she prepared my dress for the day.

“Oh, good point! I’ll read them later.”

She was right. Once I started reading, I probably wouldn’t be able to stop. I nodded and then started getting ready for the day.

When I went down to breakfast, my family was waiting for me. The table had a more luxurious spread than usual in honor of my birthday. I smiled to see it.

“Happy birthday, Bel.”

It was Charles who greeted me first with a big, dorky smile.

“Thank you, Charles.”

I grasped my dress’s skirts and curtsied to my brother. Then I did the same to my mother and father.

“Bel, I’ll give you your birthday present at dinner.” Charles was still grinning.

“Oh, okay...?”

I was a touch taken aback. Charles usually always gave me my birthday present at breakfast. This was unusual.

“You too, Mom and Daddy?”

I looked at my parents.

“Yes. It’s something special. You’ll have all day to look forward to it.”

Mom stopped cutting up the smoked meat for breakfast and smiled at me.

Something special, eh...?

I was curious now. Why the suspense? Still, I’ve always loved a good surprise.

After an enjoyable breakfast with my family, I returned to my room and dove straight into that stack of envelopes.

“Oh, one from Oliphia!”

I opened the envelope and quickly read the letter. She wished me a happy

birthday and said how much she was looking forward to seeing me today. There would be an official audience with the aristocracy today for an hour, followed by afternoon tea.

I also got cards from my school friends, including Claude. And plenty of well-wishes from the young ladies of the Najirian aristocracy who'd be attending my tea party. Daniel and Karina both sent me cards as well.

Karina recently returned to royal duties, having regained most of her memories. I smiled as I read her letter. She sounded like she was back to her normal, cheerful self.

Nothing from Ed. I guess he has been very busy lately...

There was no letter from the one person I most wanted one from. I felt dejected. But I soon pulled myself together. Knowing Ed, he would never forget my birthday, no matter *how* busy he was.

Ah, wait!

I got to my feet and hurried over to the mountain of presents. One of them had the La Boulacherie seal on the notecard. It was a small blue box tied with a white ribbon.

I opened it up, my heart pounding.

"It's...a rosebud?"

There was a single red rosebud inside.

I stared at it, not sure what I was looking at. Then the rosebud slowly unfurled until a beautiful open rose filled the box. Then it turned into golden particles which floated into the air and swirled, forming letters. Forming words!

"Happy birthday, Princess. I will come to see you this afternoon."

That's what the floating, glittering message said.

Amazing!

Was this a new type of magic?

I'd never seen anything like it.

Ed's special present made me feel like I was in for the best birthday I'd ever

had.



I hadn't seen Oliphia in about a month, and we had such fun catching up, the time seemed to pass in an instant.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes! I have the dresses and jewels I'm to take with me all picked out. And my wedding dress is being made as we speak!" Oliphia blushed a little. "But there's so much to remember! I have to get it together because a lot of foreign visitors will come, and there'll be a big banquet!"

Oliphia and Claude's wedding ceremony was set for a few months from now.

It seemed like there was a lot Oliphia had to memorize, since Claude was following in his father's footsteps as a diplomat. She was studying every day to be his perfect counterpart. But she was all smiles and looked really happy. Seeing her so fulfilled made me smile, too.

At some point, I noticed the necklace she was wearing. It had a white gold chain, with a round blue stone dangling from it. The stone was surrounded by tiny diamonds.

"Is that Claude's Magic Stone?"

"Huh?"

The blue color was reminiscent of summer skies, the color of Claude's eyes.

In Najir, it's customary to exchange Magic Stones when a couple gets married. Only one of a caster's Magic Stones can exist at any one time, and it is infused with the caster's magical power. They're hugely symbolic to our culture.

"Oh, yes! He gave it to me when we got engaged."

"It's beautiful."

"Thank you." Oliphia touched her magic stone, smiling with joy. "You'll be coming to the ceremony, right?"

"Of *course* I'll be there!" I nodded emphatically.

We chatted over tea for around two hours before I saw Oliphia off, then

gazed out my window.

“The weather is nice. Maybe I’ll go for a walk around the gardens.”

The blue skies above seemed endless and were dotted with puffy white clouds. It was warm without a strong breeze, the perfect weather for a stroll.

I wanted to walk with Ed if possible, only...he said he’d come to see me in the afternoon, but he didn’t say when. Maybe he was too busy with work again, after all.

“Ellie, let’s go for a walk.”

“Certainly.” Ellie quickly checked the time. “Why don’t we refresh your hair and makeup a bit?”

“What? Just for a walk in the gardens?”

“But today is a special day. Here, sit.”

My makeup was fine enough for a walk in the garden already, but I obediently sat down at the dressing table upon Ellie’s prompting. Maybe she was right, though. It was my birthday. *I should try to look my best.*

I left the hair and makeup choices up to Ellie.

“Wow, that looks really nice. Thanks, Ellie!”

As soon as Ellie set down her makeup brushes, I opened my eyes. In the mirror, I could see that she’d given me a natural makeup look, very fresh and pretty.

“Shall we go?”

Ellie quickly put the cosmetic items away and headed to the door.

Then she leaned out and whispered something to Hendrick, who was on guard outside. I could see him nodding.

“What’s going on?”

I walked over to Ellie and Hendrick, curious.

“I was just letting him know that you’ll be taking a stroll in the gardens.” Ellie giggled, covering her mouth with her hand for some reason.



THE weather outside was refreshing and spring-like. In the gardens, all kinds of flowers were blooming. Ellie, Hendrick, and I made our way down the garden path.

Ah, a nice leisurely stroll like this can be so nice.

I came to a stop at the tulip beds. Neat rows of yellow, red, and pink tulips were laid out like carpet, swaying in the gentle breeze.

“How beautiful...”

I reached for one of the flowers, addressing my two companions behind me. Then I heard gravel crunching underfoot.

“I agree.”

I paused; the voice was so familiar. I knew that voice so well. It was...

“Ed?”

I turned to see Ed standing there, not dressed in his usual Royal Magician cape. He wore a splendid black frock coat with gold embroidery on the sleeves. The fashion of an upper-class aristocrat.

“Happy birthday, Princess.”

Ed and I gazed into each other’s eyes and both smiled. Then Ed raised his open palm, where golden particles danced. All of a sudden, he was holding a bouquet of beautiful roses.

“Oh, thank you. They’re so beautiful.”

I accepted the roses, slightly stunned. Even upon closer inspection, they looked completely real, not like magic at all. Ed’s skills were growing and growing all the time.

“*Hmm?* Where are Ellie and Hendrick?” I looked around. But there was no sign of my maid or guard.

“I asked them to let me borrow you for a while. It’s all right. The king has given permission, too.”

“Daddy has?”

“Now, as it’s your special day, shall we go for a walk?”

“Oh, yes.”

Ed held out his arm to escort me. I placed my hand in his. Then we started strolling slowly around the gardens.

“So you said you went to see Daddy before coming here?”

“Indeed, I did.”

“So *that’s* why you’re dressed so fine today.” I giggled.

I hadn’t seen Ed so dressed-up in ages. He looked so different from how he did in his familiar black Royal Magician cape.

“Was it to deal with arrangements for you becoming a Magic Count?”

“That and more. I’ve even been given a new name.”

“What is it?”

“Almarle.”

“Almarle...” I repeated the name under my breath, testing it out.

So from now on, he’d cease to be Edoile Licht La Boulacherie, son of a duke, and become Edoile Licht Almarle, Magic Count.

“It’s a *splendid* name. Congratulations, Ed.”

“Thank you.”

Just then, a gentle breeze started to blow, and pink petals began to float down like snowflakes.

“Cherry blossoms. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

I looked up at the cherry blossom trees that lined the small avenue we were walking along. The trees were in full bloom and were dressed with pink petals. They looked like cotton candy trees.

“I love cherry blossoms. Every time they bloom, it reminds me that another year has safely passed.”

I never really noticed them in my past life. But this time around, I’d realized how wonderful it was to pass each year peacefully. And the cherry blossom

trees always bloomed around the time of my birthday. I've loved cherry blossoms ever since living in this timeline.

"Then, once the mansion is all built, we'll have to plant lots of cherry blossom trees in the gardens." Ed squinted as he gazed up at the pink canopy above. Then he softly removed my hand from his arm.

"Ed?"

I stared at him, wondering what he was doing. But he simply smiled back.

"Princess, I have your birthday present here. Would you accept it?"

"My birthday present?"

Ed produced a small black box from within his frock coat. He turned it to face me and opened it so I could see what was inside...

"This is..."

There was a ring inside. A small red stone was set in the center and it was ringed with tiny diamonds.

"It's my Magic Stone." Ed took my hand as I stood there stunned. Then he got down on one knee. "Princess, I swear to treasure you always. Will you marry me?"



I couldn't process what was happening. But then the full impact of it came flooding in, and I thought my heart would burst with joy.

Ed had just come from speaking with Daddy, which had to mean that everything had already been worked out on the official side of things.

"Of course I will." In a trembly voice, I managed to answer.

Ed broke into a huge grin and removed the ring from the box before sliding it onto my third finger.

The ring was a little loose, but Ed covered it with his palm for a second and concentrated. Then it was a perfect fit.

"I swear to make you happy."

His red eyes were so solemn as they gazed into mine.

"Knowing that I'm going to die...makes me wish I'd chosen a completely different path. I wish I'd laughed out loud more...cried more tears whenever I was sad. Gone shopping in town, eaten the things I wanted to without care...even fallen in love! And then married my true soul mate..."

"You can still have all those things."

"Heh. Oh, I'm sure. And will you give them to me?"

"Yes. I will."

The conversation Ed and I had back in that dark dungeon...came back to me all of a sudden with vivid clarity. Overwhelmed by emotion, I felt tears start to slide down my cheeks.

"You promise?"

"Yes. I promise."

Ed cupped my cheek with his hand and wiped away my tears. Then he pulled me reassuringly into his arms. I closed my eyes as our lips met.

When we finally pulled apart, we gazed into each other's eyes and smiled. I lifted my hand and stared at the ring Ed had given to me.

"It's beautiful."

I meant that sincerely. The afternoon sun made the tiny diamonds glint. And in the middle, the deep red stone sparkled.

“You like it?”

“I *love* it! There’s no more beautiful Magic Stone in all the land.”

Ed smiled wryly at that.

“You changed my mind for me.”

“What do you mean?” I blinked up at him.

“I’ve always hated these red eyes of mine. They make me look like a demon. But you always said you thought they were beautiful. Do you have any idea how much confidence that gave me?”

I was at a loss for words.

People with red eyes tend to face prejudice. When I’d first appeared in this world and met Ed again, he’d worn his long bangs over his face in an effort to hide his eyes.

“Red eyes are said to be unlucky. They remind people of blood.”

“Yeah...” I hesitated before speaking again. “But red eyes are the color of miracles. After all, blood supplies life, does it not? And it’s also the color of beautiful roses. At any rate, I think that us meeting is a kind of miracle.”

I really *did* think that.

It’d been Ed who sent me to this world so that I could have another chance at happiness. When I’d given myself over to despair in that dark jail cell, he’d used some unusual kind of magic to save me.

Ed blinked in surprise for a few moments, then smiled.

“I agree. The greatest miracle of my life was meeting you, Princess.”

As I looked into Ed’s passionate eyes, I felt slightly uneasy.

I never imagined that such a happy outcome could ever be possible...

“I have to give you my own Magic Stone, too. I’ve never tried to make one before. I wonder if I can do it?”

“Of course you can. Simply focus your energy on your palm. Gather forth all of your magical power...”

Ed took my hand in his and showed me what to do. I concentrated, drawing all of my magic and trying to focus it on my palm.

“Remember how you showed me how to concentrate magic like this before, Ed?”

Creating a Magic Stone was similar to practicing how to evoke magic. I was struck by a sense of nostalgia for the old days.

“I remember. And I’ll always be here to help you out with anything else you want to learn.” Ed smiled, then raised one eyebrow. Looking down, he removed his hand from mine. “I think it’s done.”

“It is?”

I looked down to see a small Magic Stone was lying on my palm. It was the same green color as my eyes.

“Oh, wow!”

I’d never seen my own Magic Stone before. It was a fresh, vibrant green.

Hmm? Wait, this looks familiar, though...

I brought it closer to my eyes to get a better look.

“It resembles your mother the queen’s Magic Stone, does it not?”

“*Hmm*, I think that might be it...”

Yes, Mom always wore Daddy’s Magic Stone. It was green, like this one.

“It’s beautiful. I like green best of all the colors.”

“You do? Oh, that’s lucky then.” I smiled, pleased.

Ed chuckled, narrowing his eyes at me. “I like green best because you’ve got green eyes, Princess.”

“...Oh, right.”

My cheeks felt like they were burning.

“What kind of jewelry do you want to set it into?”

“Something I can wear for all occasions would be good. Hmm, a ring could get in the way sometimes...”

“How about an earring?”

“Hmm...an earring...?”

“Yeah!”

While Ed mulled it over, I suddenly remembered something. The Ed from the old timeline always wore an earring in one of his ears. I think he always had it on since the day we met. It had a green stone in it, like this one. It was probably some keepsake he’d had since he was a child and grown attached to.

“An earring sounds good.” Ed nodded, smiling.

“Okay, on your next day off, let’s go to choose an earring stud!”

“Yes. Let’s do that.” Then Ed seemed to realize something. “Princess...”

“Yes?”

“The Magic Stone you wear around your neck. You *still* won’t tell me who gave it to you?” He was looking at my necklace with the Magic Stone the old world’s Ed had given to me.

I hesitated. The story of who’d given me this necklace was a fantastical one, one that was hard to believe.

“If I told you...you might not believe me.”

But maybe he would? Didn’t I trust and believe in Ed? The thought gave me the courage to finally tell him.

So I started talking, all about the weird and inexplicable thing that’d happened to me. And I told him about the Ed of the old world, the one who’d sent me here. But I didn’t tell him about me being engaged to Daniel, getting thrown in jail, and all that. There was no need. And besides, it’d only upset Ed to hear of it.

“So, this Magic Stone is *mine*...?”

“Yes.”

I took off the necklace and handed it to Ed. He took it and examined it closely.

“The first time I saw it, I thought about how similar it looked to my own. I was shocked to think there was another person whose magic was so identical to mine. But it *was* mine all along. That makes more sense.”

“Yes... So, do you believe me?”

“Of course. It’s true, isn’t it?”

Ed looked at me, tilting his head slightly. Seeing him now, I felt ashamed of myself for ever doubting that he’d believe me. Ed was always, always on my side.

“But from where is the magical power being supplied...?”

Ed seemed fascinated by this relic of another world. A relic that another version of himself had made.

“I wonder if he cast a spell of Time Regression...”

“Does such a spell exist?” I asked.

“No. At least, not at *this* point in history.”

Ed fell silent, pondering the ramifications behind whatever type of magic the Ed of the old timeline had cast. But then he smiled, shrugging.

“So...if I gave my Magic Stone to you in that other world, that must mean I was your husband.”

“...!”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Ed seemed to take it almost for granted that it’d been that way. I didn’t want to upset him with the truth.

“Yes, you were my husband.”

“Was I a good husband?”

“Of course.”

“Were you happy?”

“Yes.”

Ed smiled with satisfaction.

“Well, this time, I’m going to make you even happier.”

Ed pulled me into his arms and kissed me again.

I didn't want to spoil this moment. It was like a dream. So I lied to Ed, just a little. I'd no idea how much that lie would come to pain him in the future...

That evening, my family celebrated my birthday and my engagement to Ed at the same time. Apparently, everyone except me knew that Ed was going to propose today.

"Congratulations, Bel!"

"Thank you."

I felt happy but a little bit awkward and self-conscious to have my family congratulate me on being engaged to Ed. My parents said that for a present, they'd fully furnish the mansion that had been bequeathed to Ed.

I was also to have a tutor, who'd teach me everything I needed to know about running a household as a countess. I'd have to do all sorts of paperwork I'd never done before as a princess, as well as learn how to command servants and throw banquets.

From Charles, I received a beautiful dyed shawl. He said I would need something warm but fashionable to wear when I went on the many outings I'd need to go on in the future.

Apparently, arrangements for my engagement to Ed had been going on in the background ever since the Assembly when he was named a Magic Count. It'd already been approved by Parliament. And next week, many visitors, both foreign and domestic, would come to hear of our official engagement announcement. Everything was moving so fast.

"Is *this* what Ed has been so busy with lately? Not official count-type duties after all?"

"Ah, you've got it. Ed's been very serious and involved with every decision. He wanted to get you locked down as soon as possible, I guess." Charles chuckled wryly over how zealous Ed had been about the preparations.

I see...

I had no idea that Ed was going to such lengths for me.

“I’m happy for you, Bel.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

I blushed and smiled right back.

After dinner, I walked back to my room like I was floating on air. I always loved my birthday every year, but this year was the most spectacular birthday I had ever had.

I gazed down at my left hand, admiring the way the red stone caught the light.

Then I thought back to that afternoon...

“What kind of magic is cast on it? Divine Protection?”

I observed my new ring, wanting to know more about it. Usually, it’s customary to infuse some sort of protective power into one’s Magic Stone when gifting it to someone you love. Most choose Divine Protection.

“It’s not Divine Protection. It’s a spell that’ll make your greatest wish come true.”

“My greatest wish?”

I looked up at Ed.

“Yes.”

My wish...

“But it’s already come true. My wish was to find happiness with you.”

Ed’s eyes widened a little in surprise. Then he laughed.

“You might come up with another wish someday. Keep it till then. I’ll give you a separate Magic Crystal with a Divine Protection spell in it.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you. But I already *have* a Magic Stone with Divine Protection in it from you.”

I touched the red Magic Stone hanging from my neck.

“Ah, of course. That’s another present from me, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

I nodded, smiling as I lifted my left hand to admire my new ring. I'd never heard of a protective spell that would make someone's wish come true. It had to be a very high-grade sort of magic. But I knew that Ed's power could make any wish come true, no matter what it was.

Because Ed was my knight. And Ed was the greatest magician in all the world.

I stared at my ring.

"So beautiful..."

It was bright red and so round. Brimming with Ed's magical power. I unfastened my necklace and brought the stone up to my ring to compare. They were identical.

"I have to put a Divine Protection spell into my own stone."

I focused my power on my open hand, as Ed had taught me earlier. A second later, my Magic Stone appeared, rolling around on my palm. I gazed at the small green stone.

That's when I had an idea. Instead of the usual Divine Protection spell, I would use something else. I closed my fist around the Magic Stone and concentrated my energy. Then when I opened my fist again, the Magic Stone shone. I'd succeeded in infusing a spell within it.

"To make sure that you're protected from any more terrible fates like that one, my love."

I closed my fist around the stone again and kissed my clenched fingers in prayer.

But the terrible ending I'd witnessed in the old world would come about no more.

I was sure of it. *But just in case*, I told myself. *Just in case...*

16. My First Joyful Life

ONE day not long after my birthday, Ed and I went into town together.

We wanted to head to the jewelry store to buy an earring stud onto which I could affix my Magic Stone.

I looked up at Ed, walking beside me. He'd finally reached his full height. The same height he'd been in the old world, around a full head taller than me.

"What's up?"

Ed noticed me looking at him and raised an eyebrow.

"You've gotten taller."

"Ah, indeed I have. Just as you predicted, Princess."

"Like I told you." I puffed out my chest. "It feels strange somehow. Being out in town so openly with you, Ed."

Our relationship had never been one where we could stroll publicly together away from the palace. The only time we went to town was when Ed used his Illusion magic on us. And that was only for a very short visit.

"You're right. But there's no need for us to hide, not anymore. As long as I get to be with you, I'm happy."

Ed smiled with satisfaction. I gazed up at him, hit all over again with the realization that this happiness was truly real.

"There are so many places I'd like to go with you, Ed."

"I have many places I'd like to go with you too, Princess. Let's visit them all."

"Promise?"

"Promise. And we have all the time in the world."

All the time in the world...

Ed's offhand remark went around and around in my mind.

How truly joyful it was to know that there was nothing ahead of us that'd impede our happiness.

We headed straight to the jewelry shop that was most highly prized by the royal family: San Cleart. Ed had bought the engagement ring for his Magic Stone there.

After looking at various items of jewelry, I ended up choosing a plain, silver earring stud. I thought silver would go much better with Ed's black hair and red eyes than gold would.

After purchasing and receiving the earring stud, I placed it in my hand and focused all of my magical energy on it. My Magic Stone was securely affixed to the stud backing when I opened my palm. I was relieved to see that I'd apparently done a good job with it.

"Here you go, Ed."

"Thank you." Ed smiled as he accepted the earring from me. "What kind of protective spell did you cast on your Magic Stone, Princess?"

I wasn't sure how to answer at first. There was no need for it to be a secret, though. So I told the truth.

"It's a kind of protective magic that'll keep you from suffering any kind of disastrous fate."

"Disastrous?"

Ed looked curious.

The magic I'd cast would activate to protect Ed if he ever found himself facing an impossibly dire situation, like the one we'd ended up in in my first timeline.

"Yes. Well, hopefully it never comes to that..."

I tried to backpedal and make my statement seem vaguer.

Ed looked puzzled and suspicious, as if he wondered why I'd cast such a spell as that. But a few moments later, he shrugged and smiled.

"Thank you. I'll treasure your Magic Stone, always."

Ed quickly put the earring on and I gasped as I looked at him wearing it.

He looked *exactly* like the Ed of my old world...

“How does it look?”

Ed turned to me, smiling. The green stone sparkled between the fronds of his black hair, which had started to grow out recently.

“It looks amazing.”

My voice was thick with emotion. Ed frowned, looking at me.

“Princess? Are you all right?”

“Sorry. I’m just so happy. Hey, Ed...”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to make you so happy, I swear it.”

Ed’s eyes widened.

“Princess. That’s my line. I’m the one that’s going to make you happy.”

“Hehe. Then let’s just agree to make each other happy.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes and chuckled.

“So, would you grant my wish, Ed?”

“What is it?”

“I want to go to a café with you and have a drink. As our real selves, this time.”

“I think I can manage that. Let’s do it.”

Ed took my hand and we set off walking.

Out in public, in broad daylight together, we made our way down Main Street.

This is what true happiness is. This is what I was looking for. Just to spend our days quietly together, Ed and I, forever.



SIX months after we were engaged, Ed and I were married.

The ceremony had many guests. Our domestic aristocracy, of course, but also in attendance were all my friends from my days at Grail Academy, plus many foreign guests from our neighboring countries. Among them, Princess Karina of Nigren and Prince Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom.

Daniel had become king, taking over for his father, whose health was failing. This fell in line with what I remembered happening by this point in the first timeline. Daniel was only twenty-two, but he was already doing a fine job as king.

“Congratulations, Bel!”

Karina’s face lit up with joy as she came to greet me. She had regained all but a small part of her memories. Apart from that missing piece, she was completely back to her old self. Friendly, kind, and vivacious, with an infectious smile. We’d managed to repair our friendship through letters, and we were back to being as close as sisters again.

“Thank you. It won’t be too much longer until it’s your turn, Karina.”

Clad in my pure white wedding dress, I shot Karina a meaningful smile. She blushed and looked up at the man by her side...Daniel. Daniel noticed her looking at him and returned her gaze, smiling.

A few months after my engagement to Ed was announced, we got the news that Karina and Daniel were to be wed as well, forming a union between Nigren and the Sunruta Kingdom.

Considering their ages and their countries’ close proximity, it seemed to be a political marriage. Still, seeing the way they were interacting with each other, I was pleased to discover that love had clearly blossomed between the two of them as well.

“Thank you. You’ll come to the wedding, right? You’ll be on the top of the guestlist for sure!”

“Of course I’ll be there.” I smiled.

“Congratulations, Ed! And thank you again for your assistance with the study abroad program’s setup.”

Daniel turned to address Ed, who was standing beside me. The study abroad program would see young, promising magicians from the Sunruta Kingdom come to study magic at Najir's Magical Research Lab. The program had begun last year, and there were currently four foreign students in residence.

"We are always happy to welcome young minds." Ed lowered his head politely to Daniel.

"Also, you wouldn't believe how things have changed for Sunruta since your Magic Sigil invention came about. It's *very* expensive, so as of yet, only the rich aristocracy have been reaping the benefits. But in the future, we hope to make it available to every citizen."

"I'm delighted to hear that our research has been of use to your country."

Ed smiled. He seemed genuinely pleased to hear that his invention was seeing use in other countries as well as here in Najir. I smiled as I watched the two of them chat.



THEN, one day, with life going along peacefully and smoothly...

I walked in to find Ed sitting in our mansion's sitting room, frowning over a book. He was on the sofa, head bent over the book, scanning the pages solemnly.

"Hey, Ed, what are you reading?"

Peering over his shoulder, I could see that he was looking at a very old magical text.

"Oh, Princess. I was wondering again about what kind of magic it was that I cast on you in that other world you speak about."

Ed seemed surprised, like he hadn't noticed me come in. He closed the book with a thump, smiling at me.

We were married, so I wasn't a princess anymore. But Ed still called me that whenever we were alone. At first, I'd point out to him that I was no longer a real princess. But Ed would just respond with: "You'll always be my Princess, Annabel."

Eventually, I dropped it, figuring it was fine for him to call me whatever pleased him. Besides, I didn't mind when he called me princess. Not one bit.

"The magic you cast on me, you say?"

"Yes. Based on what you've told me, I assumed it was some sort of Time Regression magic, only..."

"Only it wasn't?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Time Regression magic is just a theory. It doesn't exist, at least not at this moment in time. And we don't even know *why* he sent you back in time in the first place. So I thought that perhaps..."

But then Ed cut himself off.

My heart skipped a beat. The reason why the Ed of the old world had sent me back in time. Obviously, it was because we'd been facing a situation from which there was no other escape.

But Ed—the Ed of this time—didn't know that. He assumed we'd been living happily in the other timeline and that there'd been no real reason for me to have been sent back in time.

"Well, I don't know either, but what I do know is that I'm happy now, in this time, with you."

"I'm happy with you, too, Princess."

He cupped my cheek and we kissed.

Our married life together was picture-perfect.

There were no real arguments. We just lived our lives in quiet peace. We focused on the simple pleasures, like discovering a new flower growing in the gardens of our residence. Two years after we were married, we were blessed with a new little life to love and care for. And then, three years later, we were blessed once more.

And just as Ed swore to me, he gave me all the love in the world until the end of our days together.

Count Edoile Almare, the second Magic Count the land of Najir had ever

known, went on to develop many new forms of magic after we were married. His inventions changed people's lives all across the world, not just in Najir.

But the Mind-Altering and Mind-Controlling magic that Toll had been working on was deemed too dangerous to pursue any further, and that research was permanently sealed in the research lab's vault.

After decades together, Ed passed. And on that day, a very strange thing occurred. A Magic Sigil appeared suddenly beneath Ed's body. It was around six feet in diameter, and I didn't recognize it as any type of Magic Sigil I knew.

Even our son Hugo, a top-level Royal Magician, seemed confused by it.

And I noticed something else odd.

"Lilia, Hugo...where's Daddy's earring? Have you seen it?"

Ed had worn my Magic Stone in his ear ever since we were married. He was never seen without it.

"I don't know."

Hugo shook his head.

"Maybe that Magic Sigil was meant for him to be able to take your Magic Stone to heaven with him, Mom." That was my daughter Lilia's guess.

"That *would* make sense. After all, this is Dad we're talking about."

My son, Hugo, nodded.

I would've felt silly suggesting it myself, but the fact that my children thought that was just proof of what a devoted husband Ed had been to me.

"I wonder if that's true."

In my heart, though, I thought it probably was.

My children and I smiled together, united in our affection for Ed and his magic.

After Ed passed, I was kept busy with my children and directing the servants, so I overcame my grief before too long and got back to some semblance of normal life.

But I spent the rest of my days often gazing at my ring and the necklace I still wore, thinking of the old days and all the fun we had.

Recently, I'd kept having the same thought.

If the old Ed could only know of how joyful my life turned out to be, would he be happy for me?

In that dark jail cell, he'd promised to make me happy. If only I could've let him know that he had succeeded. If only I could thank him.

It's warm today...

It was strange. I felt sleepier than usual.

I lay down on the sofa in my bedroom in our mansion and slowly closed my eyes.

My ring...it feels hot somehow?

But I found that I could no longer open my eyes.

I sank down, deep into a darkness that seemed to have no end.

RUMBLE.

An earthquake shook the very ground beneath where I lay.

I opened my eyes to see a cloudless blue sky above me.

...What?

My body ached all over. I lifted my arm slowly, looking at my own hand in front of my face. I was overcome with shock. My wrinkled skin was smooth and white again, as if restored to full youth.

And for some reason, I was dressed in shabby rags.

What's going on?

Startled, I managed to sit upright and look around me. What I saw...was unbelievable.

No...

I could see the Sunruta palace, partially destroyed. People were fleeing... plumes of smoke were rising from the palace remains.

After all these years, the terror of this scene had never left me. And now I was back. Back here, at the end of everything.

Arc 1 FIN



Elena's Point of View

I *despise* royalty and the aristocracy.

They only think of themselves.

They never consider the lives of the people beneath them. They just enjoy their privilege as if it's a given.

The first time I met Princess Karina of Nigren, I couldn't hide my shock over the fact that people like her existed.

Flame-red hair. Large emerald green eyes. Perfect skin. In her pink dress with the frills. I'd never seen anybody so glamorous. She was shockingly beautiful. But the first time she looked at me, her eyes sparkled.

She gave me a sweet smile. A smile utterly devoid of any ill-will. And she walked right up to me.

"Hello! I'm Karina Niqvist. What's your name?"

"....."

I couldn't answer. A woman whispered to Karina. She seemed to be an attendant of some kind. "She won't speak to anyone or tell us her name," the woman said.

"Oh, really?"

Karina looked taken aback.

"I see. Well, how about if we give you the name 'Elena' to use here instead?"

Karina looked me in the eyes, smiling so kindly as she spoke.



KARINA was the perfect princess.

Always helping those in trouble. Sharing her innocent smile with everyone. Always doing the right thing at the right time. And she *was* beautiful.

The kindest, prettiest, most caring princess you could ever imagine.

Dragged to this palace against my will and completely downhearted as I was, she kept trying over and over again to talk to me.

“Why are you bothering yourself with me?”

One time, I was so annoyed by her persistence that I turned on her. Karina looked shocked for a second, then smiled happily.

“Because I want to be your friend, Elena! Hey, do you want to share this? It’s really yummy!”

Karina was holding out a basket of sweet treats. I’d never seen anything like these sweets in my village. They smelled tantalizing.

“I’ve loved these since I was little! What kind of sweets do *you* like, Elena? If you let me know, I’ll bring some with me next time! I hope it will lift your homesickness just a little.”

As I stared at Karina, smiling at me, I felt rage bubble up inside me.

I hated her!

But a kind princess like Karina could never have imagined what darkness lurked in the depths of my heart. She was pampered by everyone and just assumed that was normal. She never dreamed there was anyone out there who hated her. Hated her family.

Oh, what a *kind* princess she was! To concern herself with the less fortunate...

Well, if she was so *nice*, why didn’t she bother to lend a hand to the people starving in the poor villages in her own country?

That dress you’ve got on...it could feed me for a month! You’ve no idea what it’s like to go hungry! While you sit here in your palace eating sweets, we’ve nothing to survive on except rainwater!!!



THE village I was born into was extremely poor, located deep in the countryside.

The land was all scrub ground, where nothing much could grow. We were

always worrying about whether or not we'd get anything to eat the next day. Sometimes all we had to survive off of was water.

I was known in the village as "Hily." It means "inhuman."

Ever since I can remember, strange things have been happening around me. When I get emotional, strong winds blow. When I get mad at someone, bad things tend to happen to them. Later, I looked back and wondered whether those things were *caused* by me, casting magic without realizing I was doing it. The village people knew nothing of the world and gossiped that I was some sort of demon.

Instead of casting me out, though, my family kept me locked in the house.

If I kept my head down, I could survive somehow. I learned to hide my expressions, to hold my tongue, and keep my thoughts to myself.

Then one day, everything changed.

A government official came to visit the village.

I was in charge of cooking dinner that night. Like always, I lit the fire under the pot using my mind. The official happened to walk by and see what I was doing. The man's face lit up with a strange look.

"The country could make use of her..."

Not long after that, more government men came, and they wanted...*me*. Around that time, the village folk started being nicer to me. My bedroom was switched from the box room to a sunny corner room.

I was happy. I was so happy.

I figured the first government man must've had something to do with it all, but I didn't really care about that so much. I was just happy that the village folk seemed to have accepted me at last. I didn't really need any special treatment, though.

Those happy days didn't last.

One day, the men came again and took away the village chief and my parents.

"Treason is a crime."

That's what they said. Then they took my family away. And they half-dragged me here to their palace. And that's when I met Karina.



MY powers were far stronger than the people could've ever expected.

All I had to do was witness somebody casting a spell one time. Then I could cast it perfectly myself. I thought everyone was like that. But it appeared that I had some sort of rare gift.

As a result of my ability, I soon rose to become Nigren's most prominent magician. And everyone started being really respectful to me.

It felt *good* to look down upon those who'd been snobbish toward me. I was annoyed at first when Karina insisted I come along on her trip to Najir, but in the end, I was glad I went.

I had two reasons for this.

The first was that I was able to learn tons of new magic. Especially when I went to see their research lab. They were working on stuff I'd never even heard of before.

I used the magic I learned to sneak into their library and steal their books. But they figured it out straight away and started investigating. I hadn't anticipated that.

The other reason was that I met Prince Daniel of the Sunruta Kingdom.

Prince Daniel was wonderful. The first time we met, I was alone in the gardens. There were beautiful daisies there, and I wanted to get another good look at them.

"Are you all right?"

Prince Daniel came by and noticed me sitting on the lawn. I expected him to walk by, but he stopped. I looked up at him, not understanding his question. Then he said, "Are you feeling unwell?"

"I'm just...looking at the flowers."

I know my answer was clumsy and a little rude, but Daniel just nodded. "I see.

Yes, they are pretty, aren't they? It's getting dark. It's too dangerous to be outside alone. I think you'd better head back inside."

I blinked in confusion as Daniel held his hand out to me. Then I realized that he meant for me to take it.

He was so cool. So kind. So wonderful in every way.

"Prince Daniel is meant for Princess Karina. They'll be married one day."

I overheard one of the servant girls who'd come along on the trip to Najir saying that. I felt like I'd received a blow to the head.

Then the dark feelings came bubbling up inside again.

She can't even use the simplest of spells! Why does Karina get to have everything?!

Money, status, beauty, the love of everyone around her. She had everything. And now she got to marry a wonderful man like Daniel, too?

Jealousy soon gave way to pure, crystallized hatred.

And then I realized what I needed to do.

Karina has everything. I should take it all for myself.

What a splendid plan...

And I'd more than enough power to pull it off, too.

And yet...

And yet...

I failed, right at the end of it all.

*That **woman**... Princess Annabel of Najir and her magician. If only they hadn't come along, I could've had everything I wanted!*

Princess Annabel was just the same as Princess Karina. Taking everyone's love for granted, always relying on someone to swoop in and save her.

How wonderful it would feel to rub her nose in the dirt!

Well, I won't fail next time.

Next time, I'm going to get everything I want!

Focusing all of my energy into that one thought, I infused the Magic Sigil with the last of my magical power. The Magic Sigil I'd been working on in secret, long suspecting that I would need it someday...

Ed's Point of View

THERE was something about the princess that'd always weighed on my mind.

It was that red Magic Stone she always wore close to her and treasured so much.

Just who'd given it to her?

I asked many times. But her answer was only ever "Someone very special." It felt like she was being vague on purpose. Sometimes, I caught her staring at the stone. I could tell from her expression that the person who'd given it to her was someone very close to her heart.

Honestly, I was jealous.

I wondered whether I'd ever be able to surpass this mystery person in her eyes.

So, when I finally achieved the title of Magic Count and became engaged to the princess, I felt like I'd won over this mystery man at last.

"Princess..."

"Yes?"

"The Magic Stone you wear around your neck. You still won't tell me who gave it to you?"

I challenged the princess again with this question. The question that'd been weighing on me for so long. She looked conflicted at first. But then she looked up at me with a sort of firm resolve in her eyes, and said: "If I told you...you might not believe me, but...*you're* the one who gave it to me."

I wasn't sure what she meant at first.

I gave it to her?

Her story was certainly fantastical and hard to believe. But I believed it. Because I'd already noted that the magic power contained within her Magic

Stone was so like my own. No, not “like.” Identical.



OUR married life flowed along as peacefully as a gentle river.

No big waves. Just smooth and calm.

I used to love coming home to our mansion after a hard day of work. I would alight from the carriage, walk to the front door, and step inside. Then...

“Welcome home, Ed!”

...She would come running.

Every day when I came home, the princess was there to greet me with a smile. She’d probably watch for the carriage to come through the gates so that she’d be ready to welcome me home.

It was always so cute. I could’ve traveled home using Transportation magic, of course. But I made up some pretext to keep using the carriage. She never questioned it, either.

“I went for tea at Oliphia’s mansion today.”

“I see. Did you have fun?”

“Oh yes! Very much so!”

Putting her arm through mine, the princess started chattering happily about her day. I always enjoyed hearing about it and looked forward to her daily updates.

But doubts swirled in my mind amid our happy life.

The version of me from this other world the princess spoke of...did he really use Time Regression magic...?

At any rate, I shared no memories with this other version of myself. Only the princess retained memories of this former life. Why would I send the princess back with her memories intact yet neglect to make sure that my younger self remembered it? Why deliberately omit that important facet? Wasn’t it vital for me to know what’d happened to help the princess find happiness in her new life?

Then, one day...

“Hey, Ed, what are you reading?”

The princess spoke from behind me as I sat in the living room of our mansion, reading an old magical text.

“Oh, Princess. I was wondering again about what kind of magic it was that I cast on you in that other world you speak about.”

“The magic you cast on me, you say?”

The princess tilted her head, looking curious.

“Yes. Based on what you’ve told me, I assumed it was some sort of Time Regression magic, only...”

“Only it wasn’t?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that Time Regression magic is just a theory. It doesn’t exist, at least not at this moment in time. And we don’t even know why he sent you back in time in the first place. So I thought that perhaps...”

Then I noticed her face growing stiff. She often made that face whenever I asked her about the past. She told me she was happy there, but I saw pain in her eyes whenever I brought it up.

Maybe I should drop it.

I changed the subject and gave the princess a kiss, and she visibly relaxed.

After that, I studied the ancient texts as often as I could. What I found out was that, indeed, there is no complete, existing form of Time Regression magic. At least, not yet.

If a person who goes back in time does things differently in their second timeline, history will be overwritten. In other words, the world becomes a different one, only resembling the first one. The same fate that led one to attempt to go back in time and change things in the first place...it’ll never come to pass.

In other words, time travel of this kind would result in the creation of a parallel universe.

Why would he...I...have done that?

More and more, I found myself unable to guess the motivations this other version of myself had in what the princess called “the old world.”

On the other hand, though, I *did* find out something useful from my research into the old texts. I got a hint into what Elena’s final spell might’ve been.

As a witch, Elena was in a class unto herself. But she’d passed away in the palace of Nigren all those years ago. The meaning behind the final spell she cast...the unknown Magic Sigil...had remained a mystery. But recently, I’d come to suspect that the spell she had cast was...Time Regression.

But none of it makes any sense...

The princess said she’d been sent back in time to this world through a spell I’d cast on her. And in this world, Elena had gone back in time to another world, using the same type of spell.

The world the princess originally came from...is that where Elena went?

But the princess said that she never knew Elena in the original world. So perhaps Elena had gone somewhere else entirely.

After thinking about it for days, I came to a decision.

I’d attempt to go there myself.

If I analyzed the magic contained in the Magic Stone the princess had received from the version of myself in the old world...maybe I could figure out what world it was that the princess had come from...

At the time, I’d no idea what kind of a future awaited me in the next world I was to find myself in...

Extra Side Story: A Stay in Shisui

ON the way home from Nigren, we rode through the capital city of Bulben, crossed the border, and arrived back in Najir. After reentering Najir, we headed to the town of Shisui.

Shisui was the closest city to the border, so this was where the Transportation Magic Sigil was located. We could take the Magic Sigil straight from Shisui to Kanaya, the Najirian capital.

“Princess Annabel, we’ve arrived.”

With a clatter, the carriage stopped, and the door was opened from the outside. My knight, Hendrick, offered me his hand. I took it and stepped down from the carriage.

“Princess Annabel, I hope you’re not too tired after your long journey.”

I was immediately met by Count Armilla, the governor of Shisui. He had a wrinkled, kindly face. His brown hair was peppered with white streaks.

“Thank you for the welcome.”

“It is our pleasure. I am delighted to see that you’re back safe over the border, Princess Annabel.”

Smiling, Count Armilla ushered me inside his residence. As we walked inside, I looked out one of the windows. A river ran parallel to the building, a few feet wide.

Shisui was right next to Nigren, which was a peninsula surrounded by the ocean. A river ran right through Shisui and led to the sea. Instead of roads, Shisui was filled with waterways, and the people got around using small rowboats instead of horses and carriages.

I was shown into a guest room and served tea. I took a sip and smiled. It was Najirian tea and the taste was instantly familiar.

So delicious.

The tea in Nigren was good too, of course, but there was nothing like the

taste of home for relaxing.

“The Magic Sigil will be ready for use soon. Do you plan to return to the palace straight away?”

“Hmm.”

Count Armilla smiled from the seat opposite me.

“We get royal visitors so *rarely*. If you’d like, Princess, I do encourage you to stay a while and see the sights. We’re close to the border, so our town market is particularly exciting, with a variety of goods from many countries.”

Count Armilla gestured to the large map on the wall with a big smile. Shisui was located just north of Nigren, which was located south of Najir. In other words, Shisui was Najir’s southernmost tip.

I’d studied about Shisui at Grail Academy. As I recalled...

“Is this what they call ‘the floating city?’”

“Indeed, it is.”

Count Armilla nodded and smiled.

I looked at the clock in the corner. It was still before noon. I could send a letter ahead by magic to tell everyone that I’d be staying to see the sights of Shisui and returning to the palace in the evening.

“I think I *will* see the sights. Do you have any recommendations?”

“The waterways are our main attraction. You can see the entire city by rowboat; it’s really quite something.”

“Would it be possible for a boat to be arranged for me?”

“But of course.”

Count Armilla looked delighted.



DESPITE having learned about them in school, Shisui’s waterways were much more impressive than I could’ve ever imagined. The buildings had been built around the waterways, and you could even go shopping by boat!

From where we floated, I could see a bakery, a florist's, a fishmonger's, and all sorts of dry goods stores! Everyone here seemed very happy as they went about their day with smiles on their faces.

"How far do these waterways go?"

They seemed endless, leading through the whole town. I turned to our guide—Count Armilla had lent him to us. He wore a green vest and a red cap.

"If we keep going this way, we'll join up with the Moule River." Our guide smiled at me.

"The Moule River..."

I went back over the geography I'd learned in school. The Moule River flowed down from the Barlay Mountains and through Sunruta, Arista, and Najir.

"So if we keep going along this river, we could go to the Sunruta Kingdom?"

"Indeed."

Our guide nodded as he continued to steer the boat.

Just then, I noticed a woman standing in the doorway of a building. She was leaning out into the waterway, offering me something.

"Local souvenir, milady?"

It was a beautiful little trinket box decorated with shells.

The white casing was studded all over with seashells. It must've been a souvenir meant for tourists.

It's so cute...

But I didn't have any money on me, so I couldn't do any shopping. Just then, my guardian knight, Hendrick, caught my eye from his position at the back of the boat.

"Hendrick, why don't you buy a souvenir for Lietta?"

"I can't. I'm on duty."

Hendrick's solemn expression never cracked as he shook his head. I smiled wryly to myself. He was always so serious.

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that! I’m here sightseeing, not on official royal duties. So *you* should relax a little too, Hendrick.”

“I couldn’t possibly.”

“Now, now. You’ve been away from her for days, and now you plan to return without even a souvenir? If you keep this up, Lietta will leave you for being too married to your job.”

Hendrick’s stiff expression slipped a little. I smiled to myself.

Aha, he’s starting to realize that he sometimes takes his duties a little too far. One more push?

I hid a chuckle behind my hand.

“I think she’d really be pleased if you got her a souvenir.”

“Do...do you really think so?”

“I do. Don’t worry about me at all. Just go and choose something nice for her!”

Hendrick’s gaze slid back over to the seashell cases. Hesitantly, he reached out and picked one up.

I felt like giggling again as I saw him scrutinizing the object carefully. No doubt Hendrick was analyzing them to see which one would bring Lietta the maximum amount of joy.

“This one.”

“Thank you, kind sir!”

Hendrick held up one of the cases and the shopkeeper grinned. He ended up choosing a case that was just big enough to fit in his palm.

I hope Lietta likes it!

Although the gift itself didn’t really matter so much. No, Lietta would just be delighted to receive something from Hendrick. I imagined him giving it to her. *Ooh*, it would be so romantic! I felt a pang of envy, but I hid it as best I could.

After an afternoon spent sightseeing, we returned to the palace by Magic Sigil that evening. The sensation was like floating. The next thing I knew, my feet

touched down on the Magic Sigil located in the palace's research lab.

"Thanks for everything you did for me on the trip, everyone!"

I turned to my companions and smiled with gratitude.

My maid Ellie and my guard Hendrick—I was going to give them tomorrow and the day after completely off so that they could do whatever they pleased.

After going to see my parents and Charles to let them know I'd returned, my first solo royal trip was officially complete. My time in Nigren had seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, and yet so much had happened...



THE week after my return, Ed came to give me my magic lesson as usual, and he'd brought a small package with him.

"Hmm? What's that?"

"It's for you, Princess."

Ed sat down opposite me.

Ooh, what could it be?

I opened it curiously. Inside, I found a familiar box. It was one of the seashell boxes they sold in Shisui.

"This is the same one that Hendrick bought, isn't it?"

I smiled, touched by the unexpected gift. Whenever did Ed find the time?

"I saw you looking at it with longing in your eyes."

"Oh dear, was I really?"

"You were."

Ed nodded.

Oh my, how embarrassing...

I certainly never intended to let my desire for the seashell box show. I suppose I was just feeling a bit envious, seeing Hendrick choose one for his love.

How embarrassing! Does my face show everything?!

“But really, I just wanted to give you a present, Princess.”

“R-Really?”

I looked up at Ed, and he grinned as our eyes met. I realized he’d been teasing me a little. I could feel my cheeks growing hot.

“Hmph! It’s cruel to tease me.”

“I apologize. But your reaction was so very cute.” Ed chuckled, shoulders shaking with mirth.

I pouted, but only for a few moments. Then I returned my attention to the box. The seashells were arranged in patterns to look like flowers.

So cute...

I couldn’t help smiling, pleased by the unexpected gift.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Ed grinned.

“But when did you find the time to buy it? I didn’t notice!”

“Once we returned to Count Armilla’s residence and you were preparing to return home, I snuck out to buy it.”

“After we’d already gone back to Count Armilla’s residence...?”

He went back out? For me?

I was stunned.

Ed really must’ve noticed me staring longingly at the seashell boxes. He must have Transported back there to buy one in a hurry...

I was so touched by his kind gesture, I could feel a warm glow spreading through me. As Ed opened up the textbooks and checked he had the right page for today’s lesson, I cleared my throat.

“Hey, Ed?”

“Yes, Princess?”

“I’ll treasure it.”

Ed lifted his head, smiling, his red eyes sparkling.

“I’m pleased you like it.”

A warm breeze rolled in through the slightly open window, gently ruffling our hair. The afternoon sunlight was warm and comfortable. It was another beautiful spring day.

Afterword

HELLO everyone, I'm Kei Misawa.

Thank you for reading *Reset! The Imprisoned Princess Dreams of Another Chance! Volume 2*.

This volume focuses on Annabel's desperate efforts to avoid a repeat of the terrible fate that occurred on that awful day in the world of the old timeline. With the help of Ed and other characters, Annabel manages to stop history from repeating itself and she goes on to live a happy life. I felt a great sense of happiness as well, writing a wonderful ending for Annabel in Part Three.

Now, as anyone who's read to the end will have already realized, the Ed of the first world *knew* about the second shot at life that Annabel would have.

If you read back over Annabel's remembrances of the past, as depicted in Volume 1 and Volume 2, you'll find a number of hints that indicate the Ed of the first world knew about the life Annabel would lead in the second world, based on the things he says. If you're interested, I encourage you to reread and see if you can spot them!

In the next volume, the fight begins for Annabel and friends as they strive toward another chance at happiness. I hope you'll come along for the ride and see what the future has in store for them.

Incidentally, this volume features puzzle boxes. I was inspired by the puzzle boxes of Hakone, the hot spring town known across Japan for this traditional wooden craft. They're complex and challenging to open, but if you ever have the opportunity, I recommend that you try one out for yourselves!

Finally, I would like to thank everyone involved in the publication of this work, including the editors, the translator, the illustrator, and the designer.

Thank you very much!



**AS THE VILLAINESS,
I REJECT THESE
HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!**

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
AVAILABLE NOW!

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

REINCARNATED AS THE LAST OF MY KIND

STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YAMIGO
AVAILABLE NOW!

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



**I REINCARNATED AS EVIL ALICE,
SO THE ONLY THING I'M
COURTING IS DEATH! VOLUME 1**

STORY BY: CHII KURUSU
ILLUSTRATION BY: MINATO YAGUCHI
AVAILABLE NOW!

A gothic romantic comedy where the reincarnated heroine's only way to survive this dark otome game is by not falling in love!





cross infinite world



APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

STORY BY: FEHU KAZUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY: JUN
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Takuto reincarnates into his favorite strategy game as the commander of an evil civilization! Will his kingdom building strategies prove just as good in a real world?

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND
MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
SERIES / VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA
VILLAINESS WANTS
HER FREEDOM!
STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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